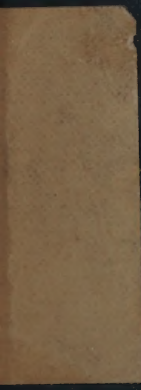
The ROMANCE of FIDDLER'S GREEN



By

CLARA ENDICOTT SEARS

The Romance of Fiddler's Green

A Novel

By

Clara Endicott Sears

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THE ROMANCE OF FIDDLER'S GREEN

by Clara Endicott Sears

A dramatic and appealing story full of light and shadow. The love between the young farmer, John Kent, and Myrtle Stone, — his garden of old-fashioned flowers full of symbolic meanings, where the circle of bright-hued marigolds stands for eternity, and the lilies and larkspur for Purity and Wisdom — all bring the reader into the warm sunshine. But the crux of the story is the birth of a soul in the handsome ne'er-do-weel of the countryside. Zeke Stone, brutal, evasive, yet possessing a peculiar charm for the country maidens, jilts his bride-to-be — the prettiest girl that danced on Fiddler's Green — on the very day of the wedding, and with such studied cruelty as to cause her death. He escapes the revenge planned for him by the infuriated villagers, and at the end of two years he secretly returns under cover of night. Under the influence of fear mixed with a sudden emotion of regret, a light dawns within him and leads up to a climax that is vividly and forcefully portrayed.

The story is told simply, but with power and distinction of style, and truthfully depicts one of those strangely quaint romantic episodes, touched with superstition and mysticism, such as sometimes happened on New England farms two or three generations ago.

THE ROMANCE OF FIDDLER'S GREEN

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BY

CLARA ENDICOTT SEARS

AUTHOR OF "THE BELL-RINGER," "GLEANINGS FROM OLD SHAKER JOURNALS," ETC.

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PREFACE

FIDDLER'S GREEN was the name of an old tavern in Bolton, Massachusetts, bordering the Nashua Valley, where an aged fiddler fiddled for the country folk.

The tavern has long since disappeared, but the author knows where it was situated, having been told of it by some of the oldest inhabitants.

In the character of Brother Simeon the symbolism of the old-time Shakers is portrayed, especially in the planting of the garden and in the potent meaning attributed to the true name.

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INTRODUCTION

FIDDLER'S GREEN — verdant spot by the Nashua Valley — where the feet of those long since gone have danced to the fiddler's tune! Happy hours of relaxation from daily toil; tender hours when hand pressed hand and lads with eager eyes sought a glance from their sweethearts! Young feet dancing — old feet joining in at slower pace; up and down the green and round and round they tread the measure. And the crescent moon looks down, and the pink glow behind the mountains fades. The evening shadows wrap themselves around the warm blossoming earth, the fireflies glimmer over the surface of the meadows and in and out of the pine woods, and over the smooth turf of Fiddler's Green the feet of the dancers dance to the tune of the fiddle!

Days long passed, cramped old fingers pressing the strings and scraping the bow, quaint old tunes, happy laughter and merry voices and dancing feet — where have they gone?

The ardent love, the romance, the simple pleasures, the passions of youth and age, the leaping fires of joy, the searing flames of envy and hate, the steady glow of deep-rooted aspirations hidden in the hearts of the dancers — where have they gone?

They have not wholly gone.

Those who through quickened fancy can tune their

ears to the faint vibrations of former days will still feel the thrill of them and catch the sound of the receding voices.

If on a summer's evening, dear Reader, when the air grows cool and the earth is giving forth her fragrance, you should chance to pass by Fiddler's Green, who knows but you also might catch an echo from long-since broken fiddle-strings!

CLARA ENDICOTT SEARS

THE ROMANCE OF FIDDLER'S GREEN

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CHAPTER I

THE DANCE AT FIDDLER'S GREEN

Hi! come, Susan and Annie and Jane!
Twist about Nelly and turn me again!
Skip down the center and point your toes plain!
Twirl with your partner and bow to the same!
Turn your partner about!
Shake your right foot out!
Turn your partner about!
All hands round!

THE dance was in full swing on Fiddler's Green. Seed-sowing time was at its height and the moon was crescent. Year in and year out as the season returned, just after sundown if the weather was fine, hay carts filled with young folk, and farm wagons and sometimes a buggy or two filled with the older ones, could be seen driving over the country roads all heading for the Green. A rapid interchange of pleasantries shot from wagon to wagon as they passed on the road. It was: "Say, Rube, your old mare won't get there in time — you'll lose the dance!"

Or it was: "Look at Jennie with her hair all crimped and fixed up so's to capture Si Whalen!"

Then laughter would follow.

But when the Green that spread out in front of the tavern was reached and the horses were hitched to the trees near by, and the lantern which each guest was expected to bring was hung on a post so that the flickering rays might help to lighten the scene, a change came over the older members of the crowd in direct contrast to the jovial banter of the trip along the road. They entered the dance with restrained and sober deportment and with upper lips held firmly down as though denying all untoward inclinations toward frivolity. But behind this poor attempt at austerity lurked the keen anticipation of enjoyment, and with elaborate twistings and turnings and powerful elbow and knee motion respectable farmers with their attendant wives came prancing down the center of the "reel," hand in hand, twirling with those at the right of them, and then with those at the left, then joining hands again and twirling each other. And in their wake followed the young folk, but the youth flowing in their veins refused to be held at bay, and the snatch of a song or a burst of merriment bubbled forth into the spring evening as back and forth, up and down, and round and round they circled Fiddler's Green.

Turn your partner about!
Shake your right foot out!
Turn your partner about!
All hands round!

Old Abel Stone, the fiddler, shouting the measures

and stamping his foot on the ground to mark the time, sawed mercilessly upon his fiddle.

"Playing fine to-night, ain't he!" exclaimed one of the onlookers — "and not to be wondered at neither, for that matter —"

"How's that?" queried his neighbor.

"Have n't you heard? Why, that rapscallion of a son o' his — Zeke Stone — that ne'er-do-weel — that mischief-making good-for-nothing's going to marry Reuben Gates's daughter! The whole place is stirred up over it!"

"Zeke Stone! Going to marry that pretty girl! Ain't he the lad the boys put into pretty bad shape once?"

"The very same," assented the first speaker, whose name was Asa Randall; "I guess he don't forget it — 't ain't likely he does —"

"Treated him pretty bad, I should n't wonder?" suggested his companion with some show of curiosity.

"It's more'n a wonder he's alive," retorted Asa. "Seems as though you can't kill them kind any more'n you can cats! Why, he'd been raising Cain round this neighborhood until folks were well-nigh worn out keeping their eyes on him! He was up to some deviltry from one week's end to another, and there were n't a soul here knew when they woke up in the morning what they'd find had happened overnight! There was old Miss Jarvis that lives in the yellow house with the big elm next it on the Still

River road. She found all her best setting hens strung up in a row on the clothes-line when she looked out o' her door one Monday morning! There was Deacon Willard, he found his newborn heifer calf dead as a door nail set up against the side o' the barn with an old nightcap tied on its head and a couple o' mittens on its front hoofs. More'n that — there was the Deacon's top boots on the hind ones if you'll believe it! And though there ain't a soul round here but knows it's Zeke Stone does these things, you can't catch him at it no more'n you could a flea — he's so quick! Worse'n that, he takes notions to invent ways o' scaring folks most sick. He made a trap that might work as kind of a man trap, I take it, and he set it out in the pasture and who should get her foot caught in it but old Widow Barnes! She was held up there for one whole night — could n't set nor yet stand, and she was found on her knees resting beast o' burden fashion! It gave her nerves a shock and she was doctoring for months afterwards. Some say the devil's got a hold o' him, and others question whether his head ain't touched.

"But when he come to keeping company with a little girl named Lydia Davis that lives over Shirley way, and jilted her without so much as saying why, and she left with a sick mother to cry her eyes out and no relatives to stand back of her and see her done fairly by, the boys got their blood up, and one o' the coldest nights in February, two or three years ago,

they went to fiddler Stone's house and took Zeke in his nightshirt to the graveyard, and dumped him into the snow and left him to get back as best he could. There ain't many could ha' stood it with the thermometer round zero, but he came out of it somehow — I've heard, though, he appeared kind o' seedy for some time after. 'T was hard on the fiddler, seeing he's his only son; and it come hard on his mother and sister too — I'm told Zeke Stone's the apple of his mother's eye for all his deviltry. Seems she took on about it something terrible. 'T is strange how that kind have a way o' getting round the women-folks — and Sarah Stone's a hard woman too!"

At that moment a third neighbor joined them. It was Josh Willis, the blacksmith.

"We were talking about Zeke Stone marrying Eunice Gates," explained Asa Randall, turning to him. "How do you size it up, Josh, that a girl like that one can marry a good-for-nothing like Zeke?"

The blacksmith pursed up his mouth. "I don't waste time doing head work over such matters," he protested. "It's beyond you and it's beyond me. I've heard the girl's daft about him — won't listen to anything they try to tell her about him. Seems her mother and her brother Jason ha' done all they could to keep 'em apart, but 't was no use — the girl would have him, no matter what. They're scared to go further 'cause she's a delicate little thing — looks

as though a breath o' wind might blow her away. Look out — there's Jason Gates now, looking as though he was mad clear through!"

The others turned to look at the young man as he passed. He did not appear to see them, as his attention was riveted upon the open door of the tavern. They watched him walk quickly toward it and lean up against a post close by as though waiting for some one.

Presently a loud, penetrating laugh rang out through the open windows. It dominated the sound of the fiddle and the noise made by the dancers, and almost immediately Zeke Stone appeared in the doorway.

He was hardly above medium height and he walked with a loose-jointed, slouching gait that invariably produced an unfavorable impression, but his face had a distinct claim to a certain kind of beauty, and there was no denying it. To a keen observer, however, the shifting, restless eyes revealed something irresponsible and unstable. There was a mocking look in the face and a certain slyness, but back of that was something more — something that was puzzling and disquieting; and it was this intangible something more than anything else about him that aroused the antagonism of the more direct and simple-minded lads of the countryside.

As animals will resent and take exception to something in one of their kind which man is not sensible

of, and will turn on the creature to destroy it, so the men of the place felt when they came in contact with Zeke Stone. A wave of protest had swept through the neighborhood when it was learned that frail, sweet-faced Eunice Gates had given her heart to him.

As the men watched him pass out of the tavern, they noticed that Jason Gates turned and followed him.

"Come on nearer the dance," said Asa Randall; and they moved close to fiddler Stone who was calling out the steps and scraping his bow on the worn-out strings of his old fiddle —

> Hi! come, Susan and Annie and Jane,
> Twist about Nelly and turn me again!
> Skip down the center and point your toes plain!
> Twirl with your partner and bow to the same!
> *Turn* your partner about!
> *Shake* your right foot out! —

A murmur of curiosity and excitement arose from the dancers and a faint clapping of hands was heard as down the center of the "reel" came the sweet, dainty bride-to-be, delicate Eunice Gates, with one hand holding out her flowered muslin petticoat and the other held high in the clasp of her lover.

Tripping over the smooth grass with the lightness of a whisp of thistledown, her slender feet twinkling in time to the tune, she looked like a fairy born of a dream more than a maiden of flesh and blood.

Many a lad looked at her wistfully and felt a

twinge of envy toward the lucky partner. But Eunice looked up at Zeke as she danced and her eyes shone and her lips smiled.

It was spoken of many times afterwards.

"Say, look at Zeke Stone; you don't take it he's been drinking, do you?" Josh Willis asked the question suddenly.

"Why — no — I guess not," answered Asa Randall, slowly scrutinizing the young man more closely; "I guess he'd be scared to do that so near the wedding day — seems as though he would — what made you ask?"

"He don't seem to be acting right somehow for a man who's dancing with his bride-to-be! He don't seem to be answering the sweet looks she's giving him! He don't act as though he saw 'em!"

What Josh Willis said was true — Zeke Stone's manner was offhand and evasive. Not but that he danced with vim and energy, swinging his body rhythmically and throwing his legs out with skillful agility, but it was noticeable that his eyes wandered from the pretty, upturned face beside him to the other girls dancing in the reel, as though he sought their glances. A self-conscious vanity seemed to possess him, as though he imagined the notice of the crowd was focused on him instead of on his graceful partner.

Few of the onlookers stopped to consider him, however. It was Eunice Gates they were looking at,

—pretty, frail, delicate Eunice Gates,— and the bright flush on her cheeks and the brilliancy of her eyes betrayed her childlike delight in being the center of attraction.

Turn your partner about!
All hands round!

shouted fiddler Stone, exultantly happy. Every one joined hands — and a circle of eager dancers swung round and round over the green and again round and round until they nearly dropped, exhausted and breathless.

When the music stopped, they formed in line to begin the reel again. At that moment a young girl broke away from the others and ran up to Eunice to kiss her cheek.

"That's Myrtle Stone, the fiddler's daughter," remarked Asa Randall, as though the others did not know her and had not seen her from childhood up.

After watching the two girls for a moment Josh Willis turned his head toward his companions:

"Strange how two born o' the same folks 'll come so different," he remarked. "Myrtle Stone's as sweet and sightly a girl as you'd find anywhere. You'd never know her for Zeke Stone's sister. I guess likely fiddler Stone takes comfort in her."

While the friends were thus talking about her, Myrtle was squeezing Eunice's hands and whispering in her ear:

"Oh, Eunice, only a few days more and you'll be my sister! Oh, Eunice, you'll be the loveliest bride any one ever saw — you will, indeed, and, oh my! won't Zeke be proud! He's the luckiest man alive! — Is the wedding gown ready?"

"All but the sleeves!" answered Eunice excitedly, her pretty dimples showing in her cheeks. "Wait till you see how pretty it is, Myrtle! — and the veil has come! — it came in a box this morning! My fingers trembled so when I opened it I could hardly get the string untied!"

She laughed as she said this and the laugh turned into a cough that shook her slender frame from head to foot.

"The slippers came too," she added when she had recovered herself — "and they fit fine! Aunt Johanna Priest is coming over to-morrow with the wreath o' orange blossoms — and then I guess I'll be all ready."

A cloud of anxiety swept over Myrtle's face when she heard the cough.

"You go home now, Eunice — don't stay here! You're tired from working so hard to get the gown ready. You want to feel fine on the wedding day — remember that!"

"Oh, I shall — never you fear," laughed the pretty bride-to-be, showing her dimples again. The color in her cheeks was heightened and her eyes were very brilliant. Myrtle felt the girl's pulse jumping under the hand she had laid on her wrist.

"You go home now and rest yourself, Eunice darling," she urged insistently. But Eunice laughed again.

"I want to enjoy every moment now — I don't want to lose any bit of it. You just wait till your turn comes and you'll feel the same, Myrtle, — see if you don't!" And she flashed a smile at Zeke and drew him into the dance again.

The reel was just starting afresh and the fiddle strings were almost snapping from the energy with which fiddler Stone scraped his bow.

Hi! come, Susan and Annie and Jane!
Twist about Nelly and turn me again!
Skip down the center and point your toes plain!
Twirl with your partner and bow to the same!
Turn your partner about!
Shake your right foot out! —

and down the center of the reel came the pretty little fairylike Eunice Gates again, flushed and radiant and pointing her toes, with her hand held high in the clasp of the lad she was going to marry.

From the group of onlookers Jason Gates's eyes were fixed on Zeke Stone.

"Father," whispered Myrtle in the fiddler's ear sometime later, — "father — come home now — it's late, and Eunice is still dancing — and her cough sounds bad. She'll be ill if she don't rest — and the wedding so near! Father, come home — there's a good father!"

But when the fiddler stopped, the dancers would not let him go — it must be one more dance! — and then just one more! They surged around him protesting until he would give in and start again.

Turn your partner about!
Shake your right foot out!
Turn your partner about!
All hands round!

And then the circle of dancers, all holding hands, would sway and whirl up and down the green and round and round until exhausted, laughing louder now as the hours flew by and the pleasure of the dance sifted into the blood.

. . . . . .

"Is there aught amiss, Myrtle? — You've come out o' the reel!"

Myrtle Stone looked up quickly into the face of a tall lad with honest brown eyes that were earnestly questioning hers.

"John," she answered — "John Kent — I don't know what'll happen to Eunice if father don't stop fiddling! Seems as though she'd got a-going and could n't stop her feet from dancing, and she's most ready to drop! And — I don't know what to make of Zeke — I can't think why he don't see she'd ought to go home! She can't laugh but she starts to coughing — and they close onto the wedding day!"

John laughed reassuringly. "Maybe she's so happy

she can't keep still, Myrtle, — some feel like that. I'm told she's plumb daft over Zeke! Don't you worry, Myrtle — she'll be all right. 'T is strange what a girl can stand when her heart's full o' happiness — some day you'll feel the same."

But Myrtle shook her head. "That's what Eunice says, but 't would n't be that way with me. Maybe I'm too serious minded — folks have told me so; but I was born that way and it can't be helped. I'd want to be quiet and understand my happiness — that's the way I'd feel. Where's Jason Gates? He'd ought to take Eunice home if Zeke don't!"

John looked over at the dancers. "I've seen him go up to her and beg her to stop, but she and Zeke turned their backs on him. It don't do to interfere with sweethearts. You get naught but trouble for your pains, take my word for it." And John laughed again as though trying to reassure her.

Just then two women passed by who were talking of the approaching wedding. They did not see Myrtle, who was standing in the shadow of the tavern.

"I hope she knows the risk she's running — poor thing!" said one. "He ain't to be trusted, no matter what. I can't help thinking to-night of Lydia Davis —'t was only two years ago she looked to him for happiness — but she did n't get it —"

They passed on, and Myrtle caught her breath as the chance remark stabbed her like a knife. She turned

impulsively toward John Kent — "Zeke loves Eunice with all his heart, John — you wait and see how good he'll be to her. Zeke'll be all right when he settles down and leaves off trying to plague folks. We look to Eunice to make a fine man o' him. Oh, I want every one to see how good and fine he'll be — poor Zeke!"

The words choked in Myrtle's throat as she uttered them, but she managed to speak them out, nevertheless. Her evident distress appealed to John Kent's heart. "'T was mighty mean you heard what that woman said — I swear it was," he asserted, to show his sympathy. "Women-folk'll talk wherever you find 'em — there's no way o' stopping 'em. But they don't mean half they say. Here comes Eunice now!"

Jason Gates was half supporting his sister on one side while Zeke Stone held her other elbow as they came away from the dance. The girl was as white now as the anemones growing in the woods near by, and her graceful head drooped on one side like a flower on the delicate stem of her throat. But she laughed defiantly as Myrtle ran up to her and questioned her anxiously.

"It's nothing at all, you silly thing — I just danced my feet off — that's all — and I'm glad I did! — I want to enjoy every moment! I don't want one to pass by without I enjoy it! — I've got all to-morrow to rest in."

Myrtle glanced up at Jason's face. His mouth was firmly set and an expression of intense dislike was in his eyes as he looked across at Zeke Stone.

"You can't go up against her — there's no use trying," he muttered in a low voice to Myrtle. "She's bound to have her own way — I've said all I could!" As he said this, Eunice drooped still more, but she recovered herself almost immediately.

"Zeke and I are going to have a wonderfully happy time when we're married," she said, glancing quickly from one to the other — "Zeke's so funny and has such queer notions — he makes me laugh all the time — don't you, Zeke?" And she leaned her head confidingly against his shoulder.

As he did not answer, Myrtle looked at her brother — a startled expression sweeping over her face. Zeke's eyes had a cunning look in them and it was evident that his thoughts were absorbed by something quite outside the present situation. She felt a sudden contraction around her heart.

"Why, Zeke — whatever ails you? Don't you hear Eunice talking about how 't will be when you're man and wife?" Her voice sounded almost harsh as she asked the question in order to cover over his unseemly abstraction.

He shook himself and looked embarrassed. "Eunice dances like a fairy — I always said she did!" he remarked hastily and with a certain bravado.

"Why, Zeke!" protested Myrtle — but Eunice

gave a little laugh, full of confidence — his praise of her dancing delighted her.

"Oh, yes," she asserted again, nodding her small, tired head — "we're going to be wonderfully happy."

The hours had sped swiftly by and the dancers were beginning to disperse. Here and there lanterns were being unhooked from the posts and the creaking of departing vehicles and the sound of retreating voices mingled with the music of the fiddle. A few moments later, Myrtle stood watching Jason Gates lift Eunice into a buggy while Zeke held the horse by the bit. She noticed that the girl seemed to collapse into a little crumpled heap from the effort she made to reach the seat, but her feverish desire for enjoyment arose unquenched, surmounting the apparent physical weakness which had assailed her.

"Zeke'll drive me home, Jason — you can walk; you won't mind walking — there's a good boy. Zeke'll put the horse in the barn all right."

A group of young men stood near enough to witness the scene, and to see the flash of anger and antipathy that swept Jason's face when she mentioned her lover's name. He swung round suddenly and looked straight at him. His attitude was unmistakably threatening — and Myrtle noticed his fist close as he spoke:

"You see here, Zeke Stone," he said, bringing his words out sharply — "you are going to marry my sister — God knows how you ever got her to want

such a one as you! — but I'll say right here now, if you don't act square by her or if you don't treat her kindly, or if any harm or sorrow comes to her through you, I'll see to it that you answer for it — so help me God!"

The group of young men silently moved nearer and stood behind Jason as though pledging their support. The strangely elusive sly expression of Zeke Stone's eyes intensified perceptibly and he grew pale.

John Kent had involuntarily moved forward with the other fellows to stand back of Jason, but the look on Myrtle's white face checked him, and he was about to return to her side when she sprang forward and stood beside her brother.

"You need n't fear for Eunice, Jason Gates!" she cried, her eyes searching the faces of the young men standing there — "Zeke loves Eunice with all his heart, and he'll love her dearly all the rest of his days — won't you, Zeke?" She laid her hand on his shoulder tenderly — "And he is n't the first one to sow wild oats before settling down — you all know that as well as any one does! — Zeke's my brother, and I know he'll make a good husband to Eunice — and — and I'll stand up for him against you all!" Her voice shook with agitation.

The young men fidgeted with embarrassment. They had not expected this outburst. One and all admired Myrtle Stone and often danced upon the green with her. She was so utterly different in character

and seemed so far above this undesirable member of the community that for the moment they had overlooked her relationship to him and had ignored her presence.

The tenseness of the situation was broken into by Eunice who clapped her small hands feebly.

"That's right, Myrtle!" she cried — the words ending in a cough — "that's right! You know him better than Jason does — Jason don't understand him — he's hot-tempered — don't heed him. Come, Zeke — come, drive me home."

As he got into the buggy, quite unexpectedly Zeke Stone's handsome mouth emitted a loud, rasping shout — that rang out into the night. It came out so suddenly that every one present was startled and looked at each other askance. It had a mirthless and sardonic ring to it.

Before they could recover from their astonishment, and as he took the reins, he leaned far out of the buggy and snapped his fingers in Jason's face!

The horse started off at a gallop, leaving the little group standing gaping and open-mouthed at the effrontery of the act.

. . . . . .

"Father," whispered Myrtle, when at last she was helping him tie his fiddle up in an old bandana handkerchief preparatory to going home — "Father — I'm worried — I can't help it — Zeke's acted queer tonight; it looks as though he'd got his mind on something — and Jason Gates was ugly to him!"

Fiddler Stone turned sharply and looked anxiously into his daughter's face — "Got his mind on something," he repeated in a low tone — "he ain't planning to plague us, I hope, just as we're so happy, Myrtle child! I've felt all full o' happiness to-night thinking of the luck that's come to my boy Zeke!" The sudden anxiety made his voice shake a little.

"I know — I know, father!" She tried to speak soothingly, but apprehension got the better of her. "Maybe I imagined there was something queer; but Jason Gates sensed it, too — I could see he did — and he acted ugly to him, father — and Zeke snapped his fingers in his face."

The fiddler's jaw dropped. "Snapped his fingers at her brother Jason — and the wedding day close at hand!" He stood looking at her in dismay.

The lights in the tavern were being extinguished and the lanterns had one by one been taken from the posts circling the green. As in a dream the dancers seemed to have suddenly melted away into the night.

Abel Stone hugged his fiddle under his arm and glanced about him. "We'll be getting home," he said hurriedly, and they made their way to the road as quickly as they could. In the distance bursts of merriment could be faintly heard coming from the fast disappearing wagon-loads of young folks. They were mimicking the fiddler with their high-pitched voices —

Hi! come, Susan and Annie and Jane!
Twist about Nelly and turn me again!
. . . . . .

"If only he ain't planning to plague us, Myrtle child!" the fiddler murmured as they hurried along the dark road.

CHAPTER II

THE WEDDING DAY

"A winsome bride," the neighbors said.
"Our blessings on her dainty head,
May happiness attend her!" . . .

THE wedding day had come and it was decided that the marriage ceremony should take place in the afternoon so as not to interfere with the spring work.

Already the best parlor at the Reuben Gates farm was filling up with invited guests. The farm was situated near the border line between Bolton and Still River Village, and friends from both places and from Harvard and Shirley as well, were expected, for Reuben Gates was well known and respected.

So many rumors had been afloat up to the very morning of the wedding day that no one knew what to believe or what to expect. Some said old Reuben Gates, who had been bedridden for years, had had another paralytic stroke, because the doctor's chaise had been seen standing before the door. Others claimed that Eunice Gates had been seized with fainting spells after a distressing scene with Jason, who could not reconcile himself to the marriage.

Every one heard the rumors, but no one could learn the facts, and it was therefore with keen anticipation of experiencing poignant and varied emotions that friends and neighbors were assembling to witness the tying of the knot.

Those with forethought were arriving early so as to

be sure of getting a place where no detail could escape them, and these were now watching Myrtle Stone put the finishing touches to the branches of white lilacs which were banked up at one end of the room in the shape of an arch, forming a sort of bower under which the bridal couple would stand.

Whether it was the result of the rumors about the doctor's chaise having been seen before the door, or the knowledge that the bride had chosen a bridegroom of whom nobody had a good word to say, it was a noticeable fact that those entering the front door seemed instinctively to walk on tiptoe and to speak in lowered voices; and an undercurrent of tearful sentimentality mixed with palpitating curiosity caught hold of them as they took their seats in the best parlor.

It was, however, considered ill-timed when old Miss Barry of Still River, a little woman with permanently inflamed eyelids, caught hold of Myrtle's dress as she passed and whispered loud enough for all to hear: "How is the poor young thing, Myrtie?" It seemed to accentuate the lack of wedding bells and joyous felicitations.

Myrtle had flushed with resentment at the question.

"Eunice is the loveliest bride you've ever seen! Just wait until you see her!" she answered shortly and moved away, busying herself with the flowers again.

No member of the Gates family was to be seen as yet. Once and awhile the kitchen door opened a crack and some one peeked through, at which time a delectable aroma of coffee and freshly baked spice cake tickled the nostrils, causing them to dilate with approval. In the meantime more guests were arriving, and even the narrow hallway was becoming overcrowded, and it was difficult to find chairs enough to sit on. No one seemed deputed to tell them where to place themselves, and this led to some confusion and not a little pushing and elbowing, especially when Aunt Johanna Priest arrived with Uncle Jeremiah, who was well on in years and very deaf. By common consent they were accorded seats up front on account of relationship.

A number of young men, friends of Jason's, went outside to make room for others and they stood looking in through the windows. Little by little the confusion ceased and the assembled company sat waiting. The atmosphere of the room grew heavy, and the perfume of the lilacs became almost stupefying. A sound of deep breathing came from Uncle Jeremiah, who was elderly and liable to doze off almost any time.

As the moments went by, friends and neighbors exchanged glances, and all the rumors that had been floating in the air came and settled like a cloud over them. An electric shock shot from one end of the room to the other when Josh Willis, who was sitting

near the window, exclaimed in audible tones that all could hear: "The minister's come! — he's gone round to the back door!"

Immediately all sat upright in their chairs and a tremor of excitement passed from one to the other which increased as Eunice Gates's school friend, Eliza Watts, sat down to the melodeon in the hall and played appropriate selections.

"Here comes Abel Stone and Sarah! — Zeke Stone's sitting in behind" — again announced Josh Willis from the window — "they've gone around back to join the minister."

A rustle of pleasurable anticipation and curiosity emanated like a wave from the waiting guests, and a rapid fire of questions, assertions, and not a few predictions were shot from chair to chair in undertones.

Myrtle Stone pushed her way through the hall. Her face was smiling, yet there was a little nervous twitching about her mouth, which several noticed.

"She's gone to join the others," some one whispered, and a throb of sentiment was felt when Eliza Watts played with deep feeling, "Good-bye, Mother Mine!" as Anna Gates descended the stairs on her son's arm and also went to the rear. The music and the sudden appearance of the bride's mother were enough to loosen up the emotions, and many of the women showed moisture in the eyes and one or two sniffed a little; but the attention of every one was quickly diverted when the tall figure of Mr. Samson, the

minister, appeared and made its way to the arch of branching lilacs and took its stand beneath it, Bible in hand. He was followed by the immediate families of bride and groom.

Fiddler Abel Stone in his Sabbath-day suit was wreathed in smiles. He smiled at anybody and everybody with joyful spontaneity and looked around the room eagerly as though he wanted every one to share his happiness. "My boy Zeke! — My boy Zeke!" he kept muttering to himself with pride, as he looked at the arch of lilacs.

But Sarah Stone was nervous. Her lips were set and her tall, angular frame was held with rigidity. She leaned toward Myrtle and said something in her ear, and the latter was heard to answer, "He'll wait outside in the woodshed until Eunice comes down and then he'll come in by the side door. It's all arranged."

Anna Gates had sunk into a chair and was holding her handkerchief to her eyes.

"Poor thing! — losing a daughter about the house and a husband lying sick abed! — it's hard to bear!" the women murmured to each other, shaking their heads, as much as to say they could well understand her feelings.

"And who knows what's before her! — It may be a funeral next!" And they lifted their eyebrows and shook their heads again, prodding their emotions.

Jason Gates had disappeared from the room, and now every one's neck was craning toward the door.

Near the flowering arch was another door, and it had been arranged that Andy Reed, a cousin of the Gates family, should open it at the right moment for the bridegroom to enter and take his stand next to the bride.

Suddenly Eliza Watts struck a loud chord upon the melodeon and the music swung to the rhythm of a wedding march. The guests arose from their seats with eager, shining eyes and in through the doorway came lovely Eunice Gates on her brother's arm.

Was it really a bride they saw? Or was it an apparition? or the figment of a dream?

She was so frail — so fair, wrapped in her bridal veil with waxen orange blossoms crowning her brow! Her lips smiled, but they were white, and her cheeks were blanched.

Those present caught their breath in startled amazement. As she entered, it was noticed that she held a handkerchief in her hand — no flowers set off her pretty white silk dress — the customary wedding bouquet was lacking. It was also noticed that Myrtle Stone clutched her mother by the arm when she saw her and whispered: "The flowers! — he did n't bring her the flowers! Oh — *mother!*"

The fact was commented upon in undertones.

Jason Gates's clean-shaven face was hard and his jaw was set. He marched in holding his shoulders back with uncompromising stiffness.

As the bride drew near the arch of white lilacs, her

mother, Anna Gates, broke down and buried her face in her hands.

It was a trying moment for all, and those present were deeply affected — so much so that their attention was wholly absorbed by it, and no one noticed that Andy Reed was holding the side door open and was peering out with a blank expression on his face.

Jason Gates left his sister standing before the minister and took his place next to his mother.

Eunice, who had walked in with her eyes cast down, now raised them, turning with ineffable grace to look at the man she was about to marry. The gesture was a beautiful and appealing one — but it froze before it was wholly completed —

"Where 's Zeke?"

The words, uttered in a startled undertone, sharply penetrated every corner of the room.

A breathless silence followed. Those who were seated in the hall arose and crowded to the door to see what they could see.

Sarah Stone leaned over and said something to Myrtle, who in turn spoke to Andy Reed, and he let her slip out of the door he was holding open.

The bride and the minister and the assembled guests stood silently waiting as though they had become marble statues.

Uncle Jeremiah Priest, being old and deaf and somewhat dazed by the closeness of the atmosphere, got confused and increased the awkwardness of the

moment by suddenly and conspicuously nudging his wife and speaking out in a hoarse whisper — "What's the matter, Johanna? What are they waiting for? Ain't the hearse come?"

It sent a shiver through the company, and several kindly disposed friends coughed in an attempt to cover over the remark.

With a sickening feeling born of fear, Myrtle rushed into the woodshed that adjoined the house — "Zeke! — Zeke!" she cried; "they're waiting for you, Zeke! — Come quick!"

There was no response.

She looked inside — no one was there! Uttering a smothered exclamation, she ran around to the back of the little building and looked in every direction.

"Zeke! — Zeke!" she called with frantic haste — "Oh, Zeke — where are you? Every one is waiting!"

She wrung her hands in utter dismay. Where was he? — where was he?

She ran back again, undecided as to what to do. Sobs of apprehension and shame choked her and her voice seemed to have lost all carrying power — "Zeke!" she called once more, and again she ran to the woodshed and looked in every corner.

A horrible fear was sweeping over her that her brother might be tricking them! A vision of the beautiful young girl, wrapped in her bridal veil, who was standing waiting for him before the minister and the invited guests, flashed before her!

"Zeke! Zeke! — Oh, come quick — they're waiting! You're doing a terrible thing, Zeke!"

No answer — no sign of him anywhere.

The woods came near to the back of the house — he might be hiding there.

She called again. She heard a sound coming from the house which made her look quickly in that direction. It was Andy Reed half out of the side door looking about anxiously. Another figure came round from the front of the house and stood still — looking in every direction.

"John Kent," she called out, beckoning to him frantically.

He ran toward her — "Whatever's the matter with Zeke, Myrtle? Tell him to come quick! Eunice looks as though she was going to faint!"

Myrtle wrung her hands that were trembling with agitation — "Oh, John — come help me find him! I don't know where he is — he's not here! — Oh, he's putting us to shame! — he's putting us to shame! —" She put her hands on either side of her mouth and called again, "Come quick — Zeke!"

. . . . . .

The minister's face had a blank expression on it. He leaned over and spoke gently to Eunice — evidently asking her a question, for she bowed her head as if in assent.

Fiddler Stone passed his hand over his eyes, and it was shaking visibly, but Sarah Stone sat motionless,

looking straight before her — her lips pressed close together.

As the moments passed, Jason Gates's steel-gray eyes narrowed and his face twitched. He whispered something to his mother whose face remained hidden in her handkerchief; then he looked back over the room as though undecided as to what to do; but he remained where he was.

The waiting seemed interminable. A sound of voices suddenly came through the windows from outside and some of the guests turned around in their seats to see what it meant.

Apparently the young men out there were remonstrating with some one who seemed to wish to enter the house.

A lad named Jude Cummings was heard to say: "For God's sake, Lydia, go back home! Don't go in there to make trouble! Don't let Eunice see you!"

A thrill of curiosity and agitation spread like fire through the assembled company.

"It's Lydia Davis that's out there," whispered Josh Willis's wife so that all could hear — "the girl he jilted!"

Jason Gates arose from his seat and strode out of the room and fiddler Stone did likewise, passing out by the side door.

It was too much for the company of friends and neighbors, who veritably seemed to rock like trees in

a high wind, and the ensuing interchange of whisperings sounded like the swishing of the leaves!

The bride, standing alone in front of the minister, was seen to press her hand over her heart as though a sudden pain had struck it and her slight form wavered. Mr. Samson, the minister, a good, kindly man, put his arm out to support her and beckoned to a guest near by to bring a chair for her to sit on. Eunice straightened herself up and waved it aside, but it was noticed that she kept one hand on his arm as though to steady herself.

Just when it seemed as if something must surely snap under the strain of anxiety and apprehension, Jason Gates walked back into the room. His manner was agitated and his face was deathly pale. He placed himself where all could see him.

"Friends and neighbors," he said gravely, "I must ask you to go back to your homes — the marriage ceremony will not take place; the bridegroom has disappeared. I ask the women-folk to retire quickly — without any talk. I ask the men-folk to remain to help me avenge, if possible, the wrong that has been done to my innocent sister —"

A sudden cry rang out like the cry of a stricken fawn and Eunice Gates in her bridal veil sank to the floor.

The assembled company was rendered speechless with dismay as they witnessed this tragedy in the home of their neighbor, Reuben Gates. Every one

stood motionless as the minister and Jason lifted the poor little would-be bride from the floor and carried her unconscious form from the room and up the narrow stairs. Many of the women buried their faces in their hands as she passed them after a glance at the deathlike pallor of her face.

Just as they mounted the stairs, the spray of waxen orange blossoms that crowned her brow fell to the floor.

It seemed as though a pall had fallen upon the house and upon all who were present — no one seemed able or disposed to move.

Then the handle of the side door near the lilac arch turned and Abel Stone opened it and entered hurriedly, going and taking his wife Sarah by the arm. The change in him was pitiful — the look of pride and happiness that had so transformed his face had turned to horror and alarm.

"You'd best leave here, Sarah," he said in a shaking voice — "God help our boy — and forgive him for what he's done!"

Sarah Stone arose slowly from her chair — "I must see for myself," she stated in an uneven voice and she went out of the door.

She went to the woodshed — to the barn — to the orchard — and to the edge of the woods. Her body moved as though it walked in sleep, but her eyes searched feverishly. Then she turned and walked back toward the house and Abel Stone followed her with bent head.

The women were now pushing their way out of the front door with frightened faces. The men were standing in groups, talking earnestly, with their heads together, and two of the younger men could be seen running over to the pasture while two others were hurrying to the barn.

"God help us!" muttered fiddler Stone as he stumbled forward to catch up with his wife Sarah, who was some distance ahead of him.

"Sarah! — wife!" he called — "You must n't stay here. Maybe he's gone home — there's no telling. I'll go and unhitch the horse."

A flash passed through Sarah Stone's eyes at this suggestion and she stood still.

"Aye — I had n't thought of it," she said. "Go quick and get the horse!"

Fiddler Stone was starting toward the road where the vehicles had been left, when he stopped — "Where's Myrtle?" he asked anxiously.

Just then a commotion took place, especially among the women, as the two young men who had gone over to the pasture were now seen returning with a long wooden fence rail supported on their shoulders.

"Where's Myrtle?" he repeated, catching his breath.

They looked about them in a dazed way, and seeing no trace of her they turned their steps in frantic haste toward the house again.

John Kent came running toward them — "Some one go quick for the doctor!" he cried — "there's no time to lose!"

A youth who had just mounted his horse, which had been hitched to a tree, shouted: "I'll go!" — and he dashed off at full speed.

"John Kent! John Kent!" called out fiddler Stone, throwing his arm up and signaling to him — "Where 's Myrtle, John? Ha' you seen her?"

"She 's in the woods searching," answered John Kent, and his fine earnest face was full of distress. "I went around with her, but could find no trace. She was n't satisfied for all we searched so thoroughly, and she was set on going back there alone. She told me to leave her —"

Just as he was saying this, there was a clattering of hoofs, and the two young men who had run to the barn now emerged riding farm horses and leading a third by the bridle. They rode up to the front of the house and halted there. The other men who had been talking so eagerly in groups now crowded around the doorstep apparently waiting for some one to come out. At the same time those carrying the fence rail took up their stand near them.

"Abel Stone, sir! — take your wife home quickly," urged John Kent, laying his hand on the fiddler's shoulder. "I'll go to the woods and warn Myrtle, and she can take the short cut across the fields and keep off the highroad — there's no telling what may happen!"

"What may happen!" repeated the fiddler, looking about him nervously — "Yes — yes — John — you're right — Sarah, come! I'd best get you away from here."

She was about to follow him when Jason Gates came out of the house. He had taken off his Sunday suit and had his farming clothes on and his high top boots. Something was thrust into his belt and he carried a rope in his hand.

Sarah Stone stood immovable and watched him, with eyes that shone like a lynx's.

"Place the rail there where it's handy," he commanded shortly, a tense emotion pulling at him and drawing the corners of his mouth down — "And, good friends, do you search every nook and corner round these parts while Andy Reed, Jude Cummings, and I search farther out around the near-by towns."

Then in a louder voice he shouted so that all must hear: "I call on every man here to listen to what I say. My sister lies in yonder room stricken to earth by the dishonorable act of a rascal who's not fit to tie her shoe lacings. You all know my sister Eunice Gates — will you pledge yourselves to help me avenge her?"

Immediately every man there raised his right hand:

"Aye — aye — you can bank on us Jason Gates!" they cried in one voice.

He acknowledged this with a wave of his hand.

"Asa Randall," he called out in a dry, sharp tone, "you lead a posse through the woods — and lose no time, 'twill be nightfall before we know it." He jumped on the horse that was standing waiting for him, and in a moment the little cavalcade was galloping at full speed down the road toward Lancaster, raising a cloud of dust as it went.

"God help my poor wicked boy! — my boy Zeke! — my only son!" groaned fiddler Stone, clasping his hands to his head in despair as the meaning of what he had seen and heard burned into his brain.

Sarah Stone closed her eyes for a moment and her breath came nervously through her parted lips, but she held herself defiantly erect. Fear does not always cause the body to succumb, it sometimes strains it to abnormal tension, and so it was with the fiddler's wife. Even the muscles of her throat stood out painfully.

"Get some rocks from that stone wall, boys!" shouted Asa Randall, lifting a large one himself and placing it on the grass plot in front of the house. "We'll set up the rail so it'll be ready — "

The men obeyed silently, with grim, determined faces.

It was a matter of only a few minutes to build up two piles of the rough field rocks to support each end of the fence rail, leaving the center suspended.

The mother of Zeke Stone ran forward with blazing eyes and outstretched hands. "I know what this

means!" she fairly screamed. "You would ride my boy — my son — on a rail! and tar and feather him! Oh, I'm not blind — you need n't think I am! I saw the black thought in Jason Gates's heart — and I see it in yours — I see — I see —"

She fought the air with her arms in a paroxysm of uncontrolled grief.

As gently as they could, they led her away to the place where the vehicles were standing, and Abel Stone followed, stumbling forward at every other step.

"Sarah Stone," said Asa Randall, as the unhappy parents were starting for home, "your son must reap according to the seed he's sown. Go to your home and keep out o' sight. There's not a man here but would judge it right to avenge this insult thrown at a sweet, confiding, innocent girl. 'T is all we can do for her to make amends — and like as not she may be dead, poor thing, afore help comes!"

. . . . . .

It was a long time after dark when they heard Myrtle's step outside the door. She came in dragging her weary feet and aching heart as though bowed down by a heavy burden. When she crossed the threshold, she threw a bundle on the floor — it was Zeke Stone's wedding suit!

"I found it way down by the river," she explained in a dull voice, before they had time to question her. "He'd laid his plans — that's sure — and had his other suit handy."

The fiddler and his wife leaned toward her in breathless suspense — "And Zeke?"

The girl shook her head. "They have n't found him!"

"And Eunice — what of Eunice?" They waited breathlessly for her answer.

"She's dead! — Eunice is dead!" And sobbing with horror, Myrtle flung herself upon her father's neck!

CHAPTER III

"THE TREES O' THE WOOD REJOICE"

For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land.

THE search for Zeke Stone extended into days and then into weeks, but no trace could be found of his whereabouts. His quickness of movement and the abnormal cunning of his nature had enabled him to outwit his pursuers. Baffled and angry, they had returned to their various vocations with vengeance still smouldering in their breasts. The whole countryside was stirred and shocked by the tragedy.

Who could forget that bright morning in May when the frail body of little Eunice Gates was laid away under the shadow of a giant pine tree in the old graveyard on the hill?

Arrayed in her dainty wedding gown with the filmy folds of the bridal veil taking the place of a shroud, she was left there to sleep her long sleep and to await the supreme awakening, while all around the meadowlarks and bluebirds, the robins and thrushes, flew back and forth in the golden sunshine singing with full-throated joy the song of the nesting season.

In the home of Abel Stone the shades were closely drawn down as the funeral procession passed by. Four of Jason Gates's friends — stalwart lads who had known Eunice from childhood — begged to

carry the wooden casket on their shoulders, and they led the way with Mr. Samson, the minister, while Jason and the bereaved mother, accompanied by a long line of mourners, followed on foot raising a cloud of dust on the country highroad.

Myrtle Stone, taking one agonized look at the pitiful sight from behind a curtain, had flung herself upon her knees, covering her eyes with both hands as though to blot out what she had seen, while Abel Stone, pale and trembling from agitation, sat huddled in an old armchair pressing his fiddle to his breast as though it were a beloved friend who alone could understand and comfort him.

In a farther corner of the room his wife Sarah sat in a straight high-back chair — immovable — staring at the wall in front of her.

Aye! — who could ever forget that day?

And now two years had come and gone — the cold of winter and the heat of summer had passed in succession over the grave of pretty, sweet-faced Eunice Gates, and little by little the tragedy had sunk into the background as daily routine renewed its claim upon her former neighbors and friends.

But there was one man who kept the fires of undying vengeance glowing in his heart, and he was Jason Gates — the brother. Whether he was ploughing the fields in summer or hauling logs from the woodlot in winter, his mind dwelt upon his sister

Eunice and her unhappy fate. The lines of his face had lost the expansiveness of youth, and had hardened into a fixed expression. Some said it was grief and others declared it was hatred, but one and all agreed that the thirst for revenge was eating like an acid into the soul of Jason Gates.

Many a time at the village store where he brought his grain, he would talk of this craving that possessed him to the men who were gathered about the store.

"I'll never let up watching out for Zeke Stone," he would say, "and when I find him, be it when he and I are old and ready to pass on, he'll have to pay for what he done to Eunice just the same as though 't were to-day — and I'll expect you men to stand back o' me." And over and over again they pledged themselves to do so.

Then they would try to lead him into talking about what he had been doing on his farm, or about the likelihood of a dry spell and how long it would last, and such homely topics in the hope of diverting his mind into healthier channels; but it was to no avail — the fever of revenge had driven all but the one absorbing thought from Jason Gates's heart and brain.

He kept the fence rail erected on the grass plot in front of his home just as the neighbors had left it on the day of the tragedy — ready and waiting, as he expressed it, for the day when sooner or later Zeke Stone would be ridden astride it out of the town.

It was solace to his outraged heart to picture the

scene; the public shame — missiles flying — a jeering crowd of familiar faces distorted by scorn and derision; the cowering, trembling figure of the wretch in the ignominy and suffering of the coat of tar and feathers, clinging desperately to the rail which would be carried on the shoulders of men of his own age — old schoolmates — who would jerk and jolt and toss him mercilessly up and down unmindful of his pleadings — yes — yes — it seemed to him to bring solace to his very soul to dwell upon the imaginary scene!

Even Anna Gates, his mother, whose heart had surely suffered enough during these two years, would say: "Nay, Jason, son, put the thought away and start to live again! 'T ain't well to ponder same as you're doing. Zeke Stone's own fate'll overtake him without your help — a higher power than you'll see to that."

But he resented any condition of mind that gave semblance of forgetting. He would turn on her in angry reproach. "And Eunice, mother — can she start to live again? Who put her in the grave yonder — under the big pine tree? Nay — nay — I'll not forget!"

So it came to be a habit among the neighbors and those from outlying farms to vary the usual Sabbath-day visit to the burying-ground with a walk along the highroad to the Reuben Gates farm and stand gazing at the fence rail poised on the rough supports

of field stones — gruesome instrument of torture awaiting the day when Jason Gates might get the chance at last to avenge the wrong done to his dead sister.

Many shook their heads and said: "'T will never happen. Zeke Stone's a long way off by now — too far to catch him. 'T ain't likely he'd return when he knows for sure what's waiting for him."

But in spite of this opinion, even those who expressed it would stand for hours looking at the fence rail in a sort of morbid state of contemplation.

But if Jason spoke Zeke's name aloud, at the home of Abel Stone they spoke of him in whispers. Night after night Sarah Stone's spare angular frame blocked the doorway of their humble home, her eager eyes piercing the dark shadows while Myrtle and her father sat inside, silent, listening to every sound that broke the stillness.

"Sarah, wife," said the fiddler one night as they were sitting thus, "come away from there! The boy's as good as dead to us — we'll ne'er look upon his face again. Don't you sense it that if he did come back, he'd have to pay the price in suffering for his misdeeds? Zeke don't hanker after suffering — you know that as well as I do."

"Nay — but where is he?" she answered in a voice that shook with emotion. "Where is my son? Whether he be good or bad, he's my son — I'm not one to forget that! Where is he this night?"

But little by little, as time went on, old habits returned almost unawares, and the daily life was swinging back to normal routine. While Abel Stone had never ceased to fiddle at Fiddler's Green, he now began to put into it some of his old-time vigor; and every Saturday night, and sometimes oftener between seeding-time and harvest, the dancers, spurred on by his insistent voice and the lilt of his tunes, tripped joyously over the smooth turf as of old.

The pittance he received for this from Ezra Blood, the owner of the tavern, was not all that the fiddler sought. He depended on this output of expression as something necessary to his very life; and Myrtle, knowing this, accompanied her father and urged him to give full vent to the crude pent-up sense of rhythm that seemed to possess him and to console him.

They went there furtively at first, dreading to face the curious and often hostile glances cast at them by those who lived near at hand and those from neighboring towns as well; and while Abel Stone took refuge from his sorrow in drawing his bow across the fiddle-strings and watching the pleasure of his quaint old tunes take hold of the dancers, Myrtle kept in the background, clinging to the protecting shadows, ashamed and fearful of the comments her presence might provoke. The antipathy, as well as the bitter and revengeful feelings toward Zeke Stone, had taken such a strong hold upon the community that, though

the frequenters of Fiddler's Green clamored for Abel Stone on account of his peculiar gift of fiddling, they left his daughter alone to hide from their sight as best she could.

But there was one young man among them who was not content to have it so. John Kent's heart — strong and tenacious for justice — reached out toward her with ever-increasing tenderness. In spite of the scorn and anger he harbored toward the brother, the difficult and painful position in which the sister was placed appealed to his quick sympathies.

"Myrtle," he said gently one evening, when he sought her out in her hiding-place, "youth nor life can't prosper except they keep out in the open. Look at it this way, Myrtle; your brother acts one way, and you act another, 't ain't right nor reasonable you should do the suffering for his wicked deed." And he urged her and finally persuaded her to dance in the reel with him.

She did so tremblingly. The memory of pretty, dainty Eunice Gates as she danced that last time at Fiddler's Green was still vivid in her memory as it was to all those who went there. The little would-be bride had left a picture that Time could not efface. But John Kent had his way.

There was a moment of astonishment when she first appeared in the full light of the lanterns, dancing with him; there were even murmurs of displeasure

heard here and there; but after the first shock of surprise, the unfavorable impression wore away and Myrtle finally found herself free to mingle with her neighbours again without rebuff.

"Come to think of it she were n't responsible for her brother's sins, poor girl — and she loved Eunice same as she would a sister," they remarked to each other after an excited interchange of comments.

And Myrtle's heart and soul, that seemed to her to have shrunk into nothingness from the blow of her brother's perfidy and the haunting fear of what awaited him should he return, now began to expand and reach out, and unfold their petals like flowers. After this she seemed to hear her youth calling to her and claiming its right to joy. Almost imperceptibly the gold crept back into the sunshine, and the song of the birds and the perfume of flowers that filled the breeze quickened once more her desire for life and love and happiness.

She tried in every way to blot out the black shadows and only let in sunshine as each day dawned, and instinctively she turned toward John Kent's honest heart as a flower would turn toward the sun that warmed it.

John Kent's peach farm covered one of the undulating hillocks of Bolton, close to the fork in the road that led to Lancaster. He could stand on the summit and look over at the vast expanse of the intervale, with its circle of distant blue mountains,

and catch glimpses of the shining weather vanes of Lunenberg and Shirley, and he could almost see right into the heart of Still River Village close by, and hear the bell ring out from the square belfry of the little church on a Sabbath morning. The peach farm was well known from far and near. In the spring its rounding slopes were a gay mass of pink blossoms, and at harvest-time the luscious fruit heavy with juice bent the branches of the trees. The country folk declared that John Kent had a gift for growing things just as his father had before him.

When Peter Kent, now well along in years, told his neighbors that "he was going to set back and let John run the farm," it was the consensus of opinion that the old man would lose nothing by it, and they watched the younger man take hold of the business with considerable interest.

And John loved his peach orchards. He watched them and pruned them and trained them with untiring and tender care and they responded in full measure.

And so it got to be noised abroad that he was going to amount to something and make his farm pay; and when a stranger came to Bolton or to Still River and he happened along in his cart, some one was pretty certain to point him out and say: "That's John Kent as has the peach farm up yonder on Bolton Hill. It's said he's doing a fine job up there!"

There was something very sane and wholesome about the young man. It almost seemed as though

the sunshine that flooded his peach orchards had penetrated into the inner chambers of his mind as well. The thoughts generated there were vital and full of the natural, healthy enjoyment of the beautiful world he looked out upon, and however dull the day, any one passing along the road would be likely to hear him whistling as he worked in among his fruit trees.

The farm sloped down to a level bit of land as yet unreclaimed, but beautiful in its natural wildness. A little brook trickled through it, and scattered in profusion were clumps of hardhack and meadow rue and sweet fern. This was bounded on one end by a small woodlot which was part of the land on which Abel Stone and his family lived.

The fiddler's house was farther down, by the road; an old square house from which all vestige of paint had disappeared and which was completely shaded by trees. Clumps of bracken and vegetation that flourishes in damp soil grew close up to it. There were places on the dilapidated roof where green moss was visible, and an old millstone lying in the coarse grass near by was almost completely covered with it.

No greater contrast could be found than that which existed between the outward appearance of Abel Stone's home and the Kent homestead on the hill: one in its coat of white paint basked in the sunshine like a smiling face, and looked out upon a broad expanse of country; the other in the shadow of syca-

mores and maples looked gaunt and colorless as though withered by its memories.

All through her childhood Myrtle Stone had been wont to seek a certain flat, rough granite rock half buried in leaf mould at the edge of the woodlot adjoining the Kent land, and look across the wild meadow where the brook flowed, and up at the flowering peach orchards on the hill. To her youthful imagination all the power of the sunshine seemed to concentrate there, and when the warm breeze came from that direction she would throw her head back and close her eyes and breathe in the exquisite fragrance of the glowing pink blossoms.

During the flowering season myriads of bees from all directions gathered about the fruit trees, flying back to their homes at sundown, happy and drunken with honey; and some would pass the spot where she was sitting, and if perchance one of them alighted upon a leaf near her she could almost touch it with impunity with one of her little fingers so heavy and drowsy it was from its feasting.

Many a fairy tale she wove about the orchards on the hill, and a tremulous sense of intimate happiness now began to stir in the depths of her heart as it dawned upon her that the hero her fancy had painted as dwelling among the blossoming trees was materializing into the stalwart form of John Kent — John who whistled in his orchard and sold his peaches on the hill.

The first suspicion of this frightened her. She clasped her hands over her heart as though to hold it in her own keeping. She was different in many respects from most of the country girls she met when she went to the neighboring villages, who seemed able to toy with love and cast their eyes first at one and then another unmindful of its power to wound.

To her love meant the fulfillment of all her dreams — the culmination toward which she had been unfolding since she first took breath. At its approach she almost dreaded its bondage.

It was this tendency to take things seriously that kept Myrtle Stone somewhat apart from the young folk who were prone to give and take without troubling themselves with questions they could not answer. Many a country lad would glance admiringly at her as he searched for a partner for the dance, but he was more than likely to pass on and choose one with a saucy, tip-tilted nose and pouting red lips in preference to her more thoughtful face.

It was this thoughtful quality in her, however, that appealed to John Kent, the young peach-grower. In a vague way he suspected a depth of feeling behind the big hazel eyes with their dark fringing lashes which he did not find in the laughing, bantering girls who danced at Fiddler's Green. It kindled his curiosity and stirred his imagination to watch for a certain wistful expression that sometimes swept over her face. It even haunted him while he worked among his peach trees.

At times an uncomfortable feeling of apprehension assailed him when he remembered that she was a sister to Zeke Stone — with the same blood flowing in her veins! Zeke Stone! — the worthless wretch for whom Jason Gates was waiting! There were times when at night he would lie sleepless reflecting upon her surroundings — the old sagging house farther down the road in the hollow where the green moss clung in spots to the roof — the look of neglect that pervaded it making a background from which stood out the grim, austere figure of Sarah Stone; and fiddler Stone with his dreamy face whose fiddle could set the oldest, time-worn feet to dancing; and the ne'er-do-weel — the brother, with his strangely perverted beauty of feature. Surely these were not the surroundings in which he had ever expected to look for his mate — his life companion.

Yet, when he was in her presence and Myrtle's eager, sensitive face looked up into his, he felt the surge of awakening love sweep these thoughts away, just as he had many a time seen the first rays of the sun pierce the dawn and clear the sky of clouds.

Certain it was that he experienced a strange new sense of exhilaration and warmth going through him when one day he met her walking along the road carrying a basket of fresh eggs to a neighbor.

It was just at the season when the peach orchards were in bloom, and a breeze from the south was scattering the fragrance hither and thither. From an

angle in the road a glimpse of them was visible, a gleaming mass of delicate pink blossoms against the blue sky, and Myrtle was looking up at them with eyes that glowed with pleasure.

He stopped by her side.

"Oh, John!" she exclaimed, drawing in her breath, "'t is a beauteous sight, indeed! And I somehow sense there's a meaning to it that words can't tell, John! Maybe the birds and the bees know — they seem kind of akin to it — but folks like you and me don't know how to guess the meaning, though it's right before our eyes! Mind you, John, those orchards all abloom are full o' life — seems as though the color of 'em up against the sky might spell something if we did but know it!"

He looked at her in amazement, not understanding what she meant. "What put that notion in your head, Myrtle? 'T is something I never heard of," he replied, looking first at her and then up at his fruit trees.

"My heart put it in my head," she said somewhat shyly as she saw that he did not understand. "I say to myself that when those colors get to blending so 's the sight of 'em sets the pulses beating, and I feel happy all through, it means something — I reckon it's a sign language we ain't up to reading."

John was silent for a moment. "That's something I never would have thought of," he declared — "it surely is, Myrtle."

"Why, the Scriptures tell us of it, John!" she remonstrated — "don't they tell us the trees o' the forests clap their hands? And all that folks like us see is that their leaves are blowing against each other in the wind! Don't the Psalms o' David bid the field be joyful and all that is in it? — don't they bid the trees o' the wood rejoice?"

John nodded his head in bewilderment. "That's a fact," he replied, "and one I never took note of before now."

"So I say, John," continued Myrtle eagerly, "it may mean a deal more'n we think for, when those peach orchards burst into pink blossoms; if 't were only for fruit-bearing 't would n't need all that beauty — any dull color would do full as well! Instead o' that, John, look at the glory of it!"

They both stood gazing up at the hill.

"Maybe they're *rejoicing!*" she added suddenly with a note of awe in her voice — "I think likely that's it!" And she clasped her hands together reverently. "Oh, John, that may be it — maybe they're rejoicing!"

John turned to look at her and then looked up at his orchards again as if he beheld them with new eyes.

"'T is a grand thought," he said solemnly.

They neither of them spoke for a few moments.

"I love growing things," Myrtle said very softly as though fearing to break the silence. "I love flowers. It seems to me I could n't ask for more than

to have a garden of flowers — roses and lilies and pansies and larkspur, with a border o' forget-me-nots! Eunice and I used to talk about it!" she added, the wistful expression that John loved to watch for flitting over her face — "she'd hoped to have one all her own some day."

John pondered over this. "I'd as soon have good ploughing land and watch the rich brown earth turn over in the long straight furrows when the plough goes under it. I think a deal o' that too, Myrtle."

She nodded her head in assent. "Aye, 't is all beautiful — the flowering orchards, the earth giving forth her increase, as the Scriptures say, and yielding her harvests; but flowers in a garden, John, they speak to the heart most of all!"

The blood flew into John's face from the effort he made to conceal his quick emotion. She looked so earnestly up at him as she spoke and her hazel eyes were so truthful!

He thought he had never seen eyes that revealed fearless sincerity so clearly.

"Did you ever think to plant a garden, Myrtle? I reckon flowers would grow for you better'n they would for most!" He wondered if she heard the tremor in his voice!

"Nay," she replied simply — "father can't earn enough to have one. I would n't even let him know I long for flowers for fear o' grieving him."

"But you long for them, Myrtle, just the same —"

"Aye, indeed I love and long for them," she replied, nodding her head in assent.

"Maybe if you woke up one morning to find a garden all laid out in that field close to your woodlot, where you could sit and look over the old stone wall at it, you would n't take it amiss?"

John was growing terribly agitated.

She looked at him in astonishment. "Where the little brook runs? — is that what you mean, John?"

"Aye."

"Oh, John!" she exclaimed, clapping her two hands together — "'t would be a wondrous thing!" And her eyes grew big and danced with pleasure.

"Maybe there'd be roses in it," he asserted.

"And lilies," she added, smiling with delight at the thought.

"And pansies and a bunch o' larkspur," he continued, his own eyes twinkling — "and like as not a border o' forget-me-nots — there's no knowing."

"'T would be like a dream — would n't it, John?" she murmured, catching her breath.

"And I'd call it *Myrtle's garden*," he said, looking at the sunshine gilding the meshes of her brown hair.

CHAPTER IV

PLANTING THE GARDEN O' DELIGHT

Awake, O North Wind, and come thou South; blow upon my garden, that the spices thereof may flow out.

WITHOUT saying a word about it to those around him, John went to work to plant a garden. He ploughed, harrowed, drained, and enriched the land after the day's work on the farm was over, and when this was done, he solicited the help and advice of Brother Simeon Taylor, of the Harvard Shaker Village — a mild and cheerful soul, full of knowledge concerning plants and herbs.

Brother Simeon had much to say about the undertaking that put a new light upon it which John had not looked for.

"Thee is a man of faith to plant a garden, John!" he declared, "and 't will count to thy credit when thy time comes. To plough the fields and till the land or to nurture fruit trees strengthens the gift o' courage, but the Minions o' the Evil One are lurking about a flower garden ready to attack it overnight!"

John looked at him questioningly. "I kind of hate to think that, Brother Simeon," he objected with a somewhat dubious expression on his face while he leaned on his spade.

"Nay, nay, 't is a fine challenging thought, John," the latter replied serenely; "thee must look upon it as

a battle-ground. Thee knows the witch grass and the persistent pigweed, and doubtless thee has fought the pursley, but if thee has never matched thy wits against them in a flower garden, thee has much to learn. 'T will make thee a wiser man, John."

There was an uneasy pause. "I might as well speak out plain," the latter said with some embarrassment and a certain amount of impatience. "I'm not looking to be wiser — I'm planting a garden o' delight. I want roses and lilies in it, and pansies and larkspur and such gladsome flowers — not forgetting a border o' forget-me-nots, same as I told you I did."

"Aye, that is good — that is well and good," assented Brother Simeon, smiling on him benignly; "but something has stirred in thy soul to make thee plant a garden in this spot! Thee has chosen a wild bit o' meadow land and has drained it and ploughed it and made it ready for planting, all in the twinkling of an eye! Thee has made a good beginning and put thy heart into it. The little brook that's purling through that corner like the River o' Life is surely tuneful and refreshing!"

John looked around at the brook in question with some curiosity.

"Thee has asked for my advice in planting the garden, John — I'll give it gladly."

Brother Simeon seated himself upon an old tree-stump and opened a large unbleached cotton umbrella to protect his eyes from the sun's rays. His

round, florid face and kindly expression bespoke a life of honest labor and calm contentment.

"Go dig up young cedar trees from the hill yonder," he suggested, pointing to them, "and plant them as a hedge around the garden like the wall o' flesh imprisoning thy soul. Now, plant lilies in and out of the larkspur and thee'll have white for purity and blue for wisdom — the two are linked together. See to it that thee plant a circle in the center o' golden marigolds, for yellow is the color o' the sun and gives thee health, and the circle means Eternity — no end and no beginning. And put the roses by themselves, John, for they breathe out love, and naught should mar their perfume, for there's none to equal it."

Brother Simeon paused a moment and looked about him for further inspiration.

"Now, there should be a plant or two o' rue and rosemary and the climbing eglantine, and here and there a bunch o' bleeding-heart. And sow white poppy seeds for sleep, and purple pansies for a sign o' thoughts; and over yonder plant sweet lavender and heliotrope and the modest mignonette — they'll fill the breeze with incense when the sun basks on 'em."

John was growing confused, but, quite unconscious of it, Brother Simeon continued his directions, thoroughly enjoying sitting in the spring sunshine and weaving a web of fancies for the making of the garden.

"Now, John," he said, continuing, "on the edges o' the little brook should grow the stately iris that are straight like temple pillars, and here is where the border o' forget-me-nots will please the eyes; the blue and violet combined spells Wisdom o' the Spirit. Thee should try to learn the language o' colors if thee plants a garden. Green, the color o' grass, means sympathy, so circle all the flower beds with even, close-trimmed borders that the gracious gift may bind the whole together. When thee has done thy p'anting thus, John, thee will have thy garden o' delight. And they shall say, 'This Land that was desolate is become like the Garden of Eden.'"

John's brows were drawn together in perplexity.

"You've surely planned out a fine garden and no mistake, Brother Simeon," he remarked good-humoredly, taking his broad-brimmed straw hat off and mopping his brow. "I've naught but praise for it, but, meaning no offense, it looks to me as though you were making out to plant kind of a *Shaker* garden! I'm not so certain folks like me'd know how to act in one o' that kind. Like as not, first thing I'd be stepping with both feet on Wisdom, or pulling Sleep up by the roots — you can't tell!"

He paused for a moment to consider the question further.

"Truth is," he continued, giving his spade a dig into the ground, "I'm after just a simple garden with a heap o' flowers in it all nodding in the breeze. I

want a seat under that wild apple tree that two can sit on, and I'd want to feel free to whistle in it if I took the notion to."

Brother Simeon was unabashed. "And why should n't thee whistle, John, if thee can do so tunefully?" he retorted, looking at him with a beaming countenance. "Wisdom takes no offense at cheerfulness! We're told right out plain, 'Her ways are ways of pleasantness and all her paths are peace.' "

John mopped his brow again, but before he had a chance to make further comment a boy's high voice was heard urging on a horse that was dragging a wagon across the rough field. They both turned to look in that direction.

Brother Simeon slapped his knee in surprise. "If it is n't Benny Mackintosh bringing the mess o' plants thee ordered from our Shaker Nurseries!" he exclaimed, his eyes shining with pleasure.

"Hi there, Brother Benny," he called to him, waving his cotton umbrella to attract the boy's attention. "The spirits o' some of our departed Brethren must have helped push that cart along, for thee has arrived just in time — Heaven be praised! We're all ready to do the planting! Thee can get the goodly cedar trees, John, and cut the sods for the borders to-morrow," he explained, turning to the latter, who was still pondering over the possible restrictions involved in planting a garden according to the plan he had just had proposed to him.

Brother Simeon pulled a pair of gold-bowed spectacles out of his vest pocket and, adjusting them to his nose, he then craned forward and looked attentively into John's face.

After a moment or two he expressed himself with his usual candor.

"Thee is troubled in thy mind, John, about the garden," he said, with a knowing look in his eyes and nodding his head wisely; "the mortal man in thee fears the Spirit, and it's causing a tumult and tempting thee to plant one to grow up as it pleases without plan or meaning to it — to wither before its time! Aye, man! It'll have a meaning to it in spite of all thee can do to prevent it! Take a timely warning, or thee'll see the pigweed and the pursley'll marshal their forces and smother it with their hordes! Nay, more! — they'll summon the sorrel and the witch grass from the east and from the west, from the north and from the south, and before thee knows it, thee will sicken at the sight. Thee'll have no garden o' delight to look upon — thee'll have a place o' torment!"

Righting his spectacles, he peered into John's face more eagerly than ever. "Nay, nay! Give thy garden a *soul*, John," he added, "and quicken it with thy love! Call each flower by its true name and search its meaning! 'T will repay thee a thousand fold — 't will blossom forth to bless thee!"

The word love set John to thinking of Myrtle, and

he glanced quickly over the stone wall at the rock on which she would sit and look into the garden when the flowers would get to blooming. Something told him that she would understand Brother Simeon's way of talking about it better than he could. He longed to consult with her.

"Truth is," he explained, somewhat apologetically, "I can look after trees and fields all right, but when it comes to flowers and giving 'em meanings, it's beyond me — I might just as well speak out and admit it. Just the same, I guess we'd best go ahead. I'll do the best I can."

Brother Simeon was triumphant. "Good, good, John! Thee has routed the enemy!" he shouted, closing his cotton umbrella and leaving the tree-stump to give him a slap of encouragement on the back. Then he stripped off his gray Shaker coat. "Benny Mackintosh! Brother Benny!" he called, "bring the spades and trowels! We're going to begin!"

It was not long before they were all down on their hands and knees transforming the barren spot into a place of beauty.

Brother Simeon and Benny Mackintosh, the Shaker boy, burst into songs of praise every now and then — especially when they planted the lily bulbs.

Affected by their enthusiasm in spite of himself, John forgot his misgivings. He dwelt with a beating heart upon the thought of Myrtle. She would love

the garden! — and some day — yes, surely some day, he told himself, they would walk along the paths together hand in hand, and they would sit upon the seat under the wild apple tree and she would teach him the meaning of the flowers; and they would watch the moon rise, and the frogs would be singing down by the brook. . . .

Brother Simeon's cheery voice broke into his meditations. "Thee did well not to cut down that wild apple tree over yonder, John," he exclaimed, pointing his trowel at it while he sat back on his heels. "A garden must have a bit o' shade in it, and thee will put the seat there for thee and me to sit on. 'T was a goodly thought thee had, John — it was, indeed!"

John raised his head in surprise, and then resumed his planting with some vigor in order to conceal a smile.

It surely was not Brother Simeon's round circumference that his eager imagination pictured as sitting beside him on the seat in question — but he made no comment. It was not in his heart to offend the simple, kindly soul.

It was joy to work in the spring sunshine! The smell of the brown earth as they dug into it was sweet and aromatic. The song of the bluebirds mingled with the busy chatter of the grackles that were building nests at the farther end of the meadow.

Every now and then John glanced with pride at his peach orchards on the hill. "'Maybe they're rejoic-

ing!'" he murmured in wonder, repeating Myrtle's words, and a consciousness of oneness with all the beautiful life about him seemed suddenly to flood his innermost being. The surprise of it almost startled him — he never remembered having experienced it before. Somehow he felt happy all through him. He even attempted to whistle an accompaniment to Brother Simeon's and Benny's songs of praise, but the Shaker music was too much for him.

His attempt to join, however, encouraged the singers to lift their voices higher, and while planting a fine clump of larkspur in among the lily bulbs, Benny Mackintosh suddenly burst into full song, accompanied vociferously by Brother Simeon, who managed to wield his trowel with masterly accuracy as he planted in time to the measure.

We will march to Mount Zion!
We will march to Mount Zion!
Come, Brethren and Sisters,
We'll sing a joyful song.
Labor to be cheerful,
Satan wants us tearful,
    We will march,
    We will march,
Praising Zion all along.

They were so absorbed that they were not conscious of the approach of four excited and agitated persons who now stood at the edge of the garden, their eyes bulging in their heads from curiosity and a sort of superstitious fear.

"Son! Oh, son! what are you doing? What does this mean?"

The appeal in the voice was almost tragic.

John looked around, startled by the intrusion into his chosen spot of romance.

It was his mother, Prudence Kent, who addressed him. Standing beside her was his father, and to his dismay he discovered the other two persons to be Uncle Jeremiah and Aunt Johanna Priest acknowledged by all who knew them to be the worst busybodies anywhere to be found.

"What do you want, mother?" he asked — a note of irritation in his voice.

"What do I want, son? Why, we came down here to find out what this means!"

John tried to hide his annoyance. "I'm planting a garden, mother," he answered, "and Brother Simeon Taylor and Benny Mackintosh are helping me. You can see that without my saying it."

Aunt Johanna threw up her hands.

"*Shakers!*" she almost screamed, her face expressing horror. "I thought that singing sounded strange enough to frighten the dead! Why, John Kent, what do you think you're doing having Shakers plant your garden? Don't you know they talk with spirits and cast spells?"

Brother Simeon sat back upon his heels and looked at her over his spectacles.

"Johanna, look out — Johanna," whispered Pru-

dence Kent, grasping her friend's arm; "'t ain't well to anger the Shakers!"

Uncle Jeremiah, seeing that something was wrong, leaned over toward Peter Kent. "What's the matter?" he shouted, holding his hand cup shape behind his ear. "What ails the women-folks? What are they scared about — hey?"

"They're het up on account o' Shakers being here, planting for John," answered Peter Kent with a wheezy laugh, putting his mouth close to his friend's ear.

Uncle Jeremiah stroked his short, stubby beard and looked with curiosity at Brother Simeon. "I ain't afraid o' him," he asserted with a certain bravado — "he don't scare me!"

His sleeve was immediately twitched at by his wife. "Don't look at him, Jeremiah!" she warned him with much motion of the lips and expressive gesticulations. "He might wish something onto you! There's no knowing!"

The suggestion did not appear to be pleasant to Uncle Jeremiah; on the contrary, he looked uneasy.

"Don't you remember," she added, speaking to Prudence in lowered tones, "that old man Saunders of Still River had warts wished onto his hands by a Shaker? — they lasted a whole year!"

Prudence Kent was visibly disturbed; she was a timorous woman.

"*Son!*" she called to John Kent, "come speak to mother!"

John was planting mignonette at the farther end of the garden. He straightened up and looked around at her and made a sign to her to go away. "I can't, mother — I'm busy; you'd best go back to the house — all o' you."

Now, curiosity was Aunt Johanna Priest's besetting sin, and more than once it had led her into troublous waters.

"If it's vegetables they're planting, I would n't eat one of 'em, not if you was to give me a golden crown! I would n't eat a thing a Shaker'd touched no more'n I'd eat beetles! — John Kent," she called, "what are you planting here?"

She received no answer.

This was enough for Aunt Johanna. She picked up her skirts above her ankles and marched right into the middle of the garden, followed by Uncle Jeremiah, who preferred to run no chance of being left behind alone and unprotected.

Suddenly Benny Mackintosh gave a shout which startled everybody. "Look out! Look out! Thee is treading on the lily bulbs! Thee is trampling purity with thy heel! The imprint of thy hoof is upon the innocent!"

Aunt Johanna gave a great jump of fright which made matters worse!

"Here! Stop that!" shouted Brother Benny,

waving his trowel in the air. "Thee has thy foot upon the larkspur! Thee scorneth Wisdom by crushing it to the earth! Thee declarest thyself a daughter of iniquity!"

Uncle Jeremiah, standing stock-still with astonishment in the middle of the path, saw with dismay his wife give another frantic leap which landed her in a place where the earth was very soft and her feet sank into it, almost covering her cloth boots with elastic sides. She just escaped treading upon a turtle that had crawled out of the brook.

"Woman! Beware of the Leviathan from that wide sea wherein are things creeping innumerable, both small and great beasts!" cried out Brother Simeon in warning tones, quoting the Scriptures.

Aunt Johanna uttered a scream! She floundered this way and that and grabbed Uncle Jeremiah by the arm.

"They reel to and fro and stagger like a drunken man and are at their wits' ends," shouted Benny Mackintosh, drawing his statements from the same source.

Uncle Jeremiah, not knowing the meaning of his wife's gyrations, became exceedingly fearful.

"Johanna! Johanna!" he exclaimed, "whatever's the matter with you! Can't you stand on your feet steady? I know," he cried, as an explanation occurred to him, "it's those Shakers casting spells! Here, Peter Kent, come help hold Johanna!"

Now, this accusation aroused the righteous indignation of Brother Simeon. He arose from his knees and faced Uncle Jeremiah, looking at him over his spectacles.

"Thee is an unlawful man," he declared, pointing his trowel right at him; "thee knows the Scriptures. Thee knows what they say o' them that speak lies! 'On all their heads shall be baldness and their beards shall be cut off!'"

Aunt Johanna uttered another scream and clutched at Uncle Jeremiah more convulsively than ever. He turned pale. He had not heard what had been said, but he had been pointed at! He remembered old man Saunders of Still River, and he felt his knees begin to shake. To add to his discomfiture Aunt Johanna shouted in his ear: "Keep your hat on, Jeremiah! Don't take it off for love or money! He's wished *baldness* on you, and he claims your beard 'll be cut off! *Did n't I tell you?*" And she floundered about on the soft earth more destructively than ever.

"Stop, woman!" cried Brother Simeon as he saw Uncle Jeremiah surreptitiously lift his hat and feel of his iron-gray hair in alarm. "'Thy tongue is as an arrow shot out! it speaketh deceit!' As for this man, his mischief shall return upon his own head and his violent dealing shall come down upon his own pate!"

"Son!" called out Prudence Kent in distress, "son John! take Aunt Johanna by the arm and lead her back here — it's terrible for the poor woman! Oh,

John, my son, how came you to have Shakers in your garden?"

John picked his way carefully through the flower beds and took hold of both of them so as to pilot them to safe ground. His face revealed very forcibly the annoyance that was seething within him. "Now, look here, Aunt Johanna," he said, "you and Uncle Jeremiah go back home! You've no right to put extra labor on a man this way nor to make accusations against those who are helping him out! You've done more harm in the few moments you've been in this garden than we can remedy during the rest o' the day!"

"'The chariots of Israel and the horsemen thereof' might have passed through here from the furrows thee has made!" cried Benny Mackintosh, trying to keep down the serpent of anger that was raising its head in him.

John managed to get them back to the edge of the garden with as little damage to the plants as was possible under the circumstances. Aunt Johanna showed visible signs of the ordeal she had been through. Her bonnet was pitched to one side and her shawl was awry, while the unfortunate Uncle Jeremiah — thoroughly mystified, having heard nothing except that baldness had been wished on him — held his hat on with both hands and walked with unsteady gait.

"This is a sorry day for me, Peter and Prudence, kind friends both o' you! — a sorry day for me!" he

ejaculated when he drew near to them, and he nervously took another pull at his hair to see if all was yet well!

Peter Kent had been inclined to see humor in the situation to start with. He was not one to lose his perspective easily, but the repeated quotations from the Scriptures had told on him. He was a devout man and the application of them had impressed him not a little

"Johanna was to blame," he asserted. "She'd no business to go tramping into John's garden uninvited! He's running the farm, and he's a right to run it as he's a mind to so long as it pays."

"But you never said, Peter, that John could have *Shakers* to help him!" remonstrated his wife in quavering tones, casting frightened glances at Benny Mackintosh whose whole attitude betrayed that he was still fighting that same serpent and that another outbreak was imminent.

"If by that you mean Brother Simeon Taylor, I'm ready to stand right up anywhere and testify there's no finer man to be found in the State."

They all looked around in surprise! It was fiddler Stone who spoke from across the wall.

The blood mounted to John's face, for as he turned he saw Myrtle standing beside her father. They had been startled by hearing screams, and had rushed through the woodlot arriving just in time to hear the remark made by Prudence Kent.

The appearance of the father and daughter caused Aunt Johanna's curiosity to veer momentarily.

"Is that Abel Stone's woodlot?" she snapped out hastily taking note of its close proximity to John's garden.

"I guess it be," answered Peter Kent. "I know he owns a bit o' land somewheres along here."

Fearing what her next remark might be, for Aunt Johanna was outspoken, John hurriedly intercepted it.

"Look here, father, you take these folks away from here!" he said shortly. "Next time Aunt Johanna and Uncle Jeremiah come visiting you, keep 'em up to the house. I can't have my spring planting ruined like this! I've too much work to do to be doing it over twice, and I can't have accusations, true or false, brought up against those helping me neither. Abel Stone's right in what he says and I'm glad he said it!" he added, making a gesture of acknowledgment to him with his hand. "Brother Simeon's a fine man — none finer, and he's bringing up Benny Mackintosh to be a fine lad!"

"But John, John, my son — they're Shakers! They see visions! They talk with the dead! They cast spells!" cried his mother clasping her hands in distress.

"Father," insisted John, turning to him appealingly, "take the women-folk away from here quick! And mind Uncle Jeremiah — he don't act right!"

Under the impression that the conversation still concerned him and his dilemma, the complainings of the unfortunate man were becoming loud and even shrill, especially so at this moment, as Benny Mackintosh had fastened his eyes upon him in a fixed stare which rendered him exceedingly nervous.

Brother Simeon saw a flash in the boy's eye and he gave a note of warning. "Hold thy peace, Brother Benny!" he said quickly. "Take no heed of lying and slandering and evil speaking, nor of man that chattereth like a magpie and swalloweth his words! The prophet Ezekiel saith of such: 'his hands are feeble and his knees are weak like water!'"

Aunt Johanna only heard the end of the sentence, but that was enough! She seized hold of her husband's arm and tried to pull him away. She began to shake with agitation.

"Did you hear that, Peter Kent?" she said in a loud and terrified whisper — "did you hear that? They're pecking on him! They won't leave him alone! They're making to weaken his knees now, as if it were n't enough to wish the hair off of his head! Jeremiah, come away!" she cried, putting her mouth near his ear and lifting her voice — "get away before another spell sets to working!"

Uncle Jeremiah's eyes almost popped from their sockets. "What d' ye mean, Johanna — *more spells!* I'll have the law on 'em!" cried the poor man, turning about in a panic and starting to shuffle off as fast

as he could go, holding his hat on tight with his free hand.

"A sorry day for me!" he lamented wailingly. "I wish I'd never come a-visiting." And he went so fast that even Aunt Johanna had hard work keeping up with him.

Peter Kent and his wife hurried after them with sobered faces, reminding each other in sudden fear of the tales they had heard of the strange powers of the Shakers.

"They seem harmless enough to look at 'em," wheezed out Peter Kent as he went along puffing and blowing asthmatically.

"Aye! but there's the danger, Peter!" answered his wife clinging to his arm and hurrying beside him. "They'll cast a spell even though they look as mild as buttermilk — so I've heard tell!"

Brother Simeon, wiping his spectacles and putting them onto the bridge of his nose, stood watching the retreating figures until they were almost out of sight. Then he looked around at Benny Mackintosh.

"Thee will do well to take heed, Brother Benny," he remarked with a kindly glance in his eye, "how Brother Jeremiah bears out the saying of the prophet Isaiah: 'Like a crane or a swallow so did I chatter!'" Upon which the good man got down upon his hands and knees again and resumed his planting with a quiet mind.

. . . . . .

It was after sundown, when the Shakers had been gone some time, and John lingered to look over the work that had been accomplished, that he heard some one speak his name.

He knew the voice. To him it was like music.

"Myrtle!" he answered eagerly, going toward her.

She stretched her hand out to him across the old stone wall and looked up with the sweetest smile he thought he had ever seen.

"You've kept your word! You've planted a garden, John," she said, her cheeks reddening.

"Aye — and I'll allow it's been an uneasy kind o' job! But it's planted, Myrtle," he answered, taking her hand in his and returning her bright smile. He hesitated a moment. "Brother Simeon put a heap o' meaning into it which puzzles me considerably," he added with some show of diffidence; "it'll take you to make it out I guess — but I'm thinking you'll do it." And he explained what he had been told the lilies and the larkspur and the circle of marigold and the stately iris stood for.

Myrtle's face grew radiant and her eyes shone like stars.

"'T is beautiful," she murmured — "'t is a garden o' dreams! Somehow I sense the like of it somewheres in my soul! 'T will be a wondrous thing to watch it grow, John!"

He flushed with pleasure at her words. "There'll be a seat under yonder apple tree," he said with a

note of shyness in his voice. In spite of his big frame and strong muscles there was something boyish and ingenuous in John Kent. "And when all the flowers are blooming — maybe you'll come and sit there with me — Myrtle?"

He bent his head down and searched her face anxiously. She felt his hand tremble and her heart began to throb.

"Maybe," she answered, looking down in order to hide her joy.

CHAPTER V

THE PHANTOM VOICE

"I hear a sound in the wind, Mother! — did'st hear?"
"Nay, child, it but groans in the chimney."
"I hear a sound in the wind, Mother! 't is fearsome!"
"Nay, child, it but rattles the well-sweep."
"Mother! Mother! I hear a sound in the wind — 't is a voice!"

As was to be expected, Aunt Johanna Priest lost no time in retailing at length to her frightened neighbors the experience with the Shakers in John Kent's garden, and, if the truth must be told, she derived unqualified satisfaction in describing it at its worst. To see the startled glances and nervous twitchings produced by the telling of her tale to some timorous friend was unction to her soul.

It must also be said that, finding himself suddenly an object of interest, Uncle Jeremiah developed a sort of lugubrious pride in his dilemma and resented any allusion to old man Saunders of Still River, claiming that his own case was worse than warts any day.

If by chance any one questioned this, it was noticed he showed considerable irritability. Some natures are peculiarly sensitive to rivalry in such matters.

In spite of this rapacious desire for monopoly, however, he lived in terror of the results, and what with allowing his mind to dwell upon the possible weakening of his knees and the loss of the iron-gray

scrub-growth that adorned the top of his head, and the habit his wife contracted of calling attention to these now vulnerable points, and what with being stared at by young and old when he went to the village or to the Meeting-House on the Sabbath, and being greeted by such questions as "Spell working to-day, Uncle Jeremiah?" his gait at any rate was beginning to show ominous signs and was becoming jerky and uncertain.

While some of those skeptically inclined made sport of him on the sly, the more impressionable ones — and there were many of them — viewed his case with apprehension, and a dread of invisible influences and supernatural occurrences spread from one farm to another until every one was on the lookout for unusual signs, interpreting them according to their own fevered fancy.

But a genuine tremor of fear shot through the countryside when one day, later on in the season, it was whispered about that, in passing the Reuben Gates farm, Brother Simeon, the Shaker, accompanied as usual by Benny Mackintosh, had stopped and looked attentively at the gruesome fence rail on the grass plot in front of the house, and more than that had gone inside and laid his hand upon it, and that very night Anna Gates had heard a strange sound, something like sobbing, coming through the window of the room where Eunice died and had come near fainting from terror.

Lem Sprague's wife was the first one to go to find out the truth about it. She lived farther along the road, nearer to Still River, and Giles Sawyer, who was coach driver, told her about it when he stopped to water his horses. She did not wait a minute, but dropped her sewing and went right down there. She was a kindly woman. Her name was Rosella Willard before she was married, and she and Anna had played together as children.

When she went up to the side door, the latter was busy in the kitchen, but she came to let her in when she saw through the window who it was coming.

"Who told you, Rosella?" she asked in a constrained voice, without further greeting.

"Giles Sawyer. I came right over as soon as I heard it."

Rosella Sprague walked on tiptoe through the door her friend had opened for her, though it was morning and a bright sun shining. Anna's manner and the story she had heard made her fearful. They sat down by the table and Anna went on paring the potatoes she had left to go to the door.

"He said the sound came in from the window in Eunice's room," Rosella remarked softly without preamble.

Anna nodded her head and pressed her lips together. She was nervous and the tears were ready to flow at any moment. They remained silent so that she could collect herself.

"Tell me about it when you can," added Rosella finally in a quavering voice, putting a hand on her friend's arm. The latter's emotion was beginning to take hold of her. "Giles said the Shakers passed in the morning — 't was a strange coincidence!"

"I don't somehow feel 't was a coincidence, Rosella," asserted Anna earnestly and leaning toward her. "I don't say but what the Shakers are saintly folks — I know they be — but they believe in spirits and hold converse with 'em and conjure them up at will, so they say! Maybe 't is because they're saintly they can do so. Anyway, 't was Simeon Taylor who sells the flower seeds and herbs who passed with that foundling boy, Benny Mackintosh, and they stood stock-still looking at the fence rail.

"Oh, Rosella!" she exclaimed, lowering her voice and looking over her shoulder toward a door at the farther end of the kitchen, "I wish Jason could bring himself to take away that fence rail! I tell him no good'll come to us for him keeping it there!"

She got up from her chair and went and looked out of the door that led into the back part of the house.

"He's in the woodshed chopping," she explained, putting her finger up to her lips as a signal to her friend to speak low. "I'm always scared at that boy Benny Mackintosh!" she continued in an eager undertone, "he's so thin and pale and he's got such big outstanding ears and his eyes are so shiny! He looks 'most all the time as though he were seeing

things! He seemed to have a lot to say while they stood looking," she added. "I watched from behind the curtain in the sitting-room, and Brother Simeon, as he's called, all of a sudden come right in the gate and laid his hand on the rail! When I saw him do that, I just knew something would come of it, Rosella! — I felt it all through me!"

"Did he say anything when he did it?" asked the latter with eager curiosity.

"I could n't hear but a chance word or two. It seemed he was quoting Scripture. When he done that, they went off, but I did n't feel easy all day. I felt just as though a cold hand had been laid right on my heart!"

Anna pressed her lips together again and struggled to get control over herself.

"'T was Jason heard the sound first," she continued, lowering her voice still more after a few moments' pause. "Hush! he's all upset! I'd as soon he did n't know I was talking about it — and we've got to keep it somehow from Reuben." She stopped and listened. "Yes, 't was Jason heard it first," she went on; "you recall how the wind started up last evening and it looked as though we'd get rain? I said to him, 'Jason,' I said, 'go close the window in Eunice's room else it may rain in there.' I dread going into that room after dark — I don't mind saying so — but Jason's different, he don't seem to mind. 'T were n't but a few moments when he came downstairs, treading softly.

"'Mother,' he called in a low voice, 'mother'! I thought his voice sounded queer and I went right out into the entry. 'What is it, Jason?' I asked. Somehow I knew there was something out o' the ordinary by the way he spoke.

"'There's an awful strange sound I heard coming through the window up there — I'd like you to come up!'

"I was frightened — I'm kind o' timid about things.

"'What kind of a sound was it?' I asked, speaking low so's not to wake Reuben.

"'Kind of a sobbing sound, mother,' he whispered back. 'Come up there and listen.'

"I don't know why, but when he said that I recalled the Shaker putting his hand on the fence rail, and again I felt as though it had been laid on my heart! I presume 't was fright made me think it.

"I was ashamed to show fear before my own son, so I went upstairs, and Jason took a-hold o' my arm and we went into the room. It was dark there and we stood still when we got a little ways in. I heard a gust o' wind come round the corner o' the house, and then all of a sudden there come a sort of low cry, and then the queer sound Jason spoke of, followed by another faint long-drawn-out cry again that seemed to fade away until it stopped altogether. I felt as though I'd drop to the floor — I should have if it had n't been for Jason holding me up.

"'Mother,' he whispered — and I could feel he was all strung up — 'Mother! don't that sound the way Eunice used to take on sometimes when she was sick abed?'

"It was just what I'd thought of Rosella! —'t was the very first thought that came to me when I heard it! I could n't speak. I pressed his arm to show him I knew what he meant.

"'Don't you recall, mother, how you used to chide her for making that very noise? You used to call it "*complaining*" — don't you remember?'

"I pressed his arm again. I could n't for the life o' me get a word out — my throat was all dry. We were just turning to leave the room when it come again!

"'Jason! Jason!' I cried — I was trembling all over — 'go look out o' the window — there must be something there!'

"I got hold of a chair and held on to it and Jason groped his way to the window. He leaned way out and looked all around, but he could n't see a thing.

"'Come away, Jason — son!' I implored him. I felt as though I could n't stand being another minute in that room. If the sound had come again, I don't believe but what I'd have fainted away right where I was standing, I was so upset.

"We hurried down the stairs and I broke down when we reached the kitchen. Jason sat right there

where you're sitting, Rosella, and put his arms on the table and leaned his head on 'em.

"When I was able to stop crying, I stretched out my hand and touched his shoulder. 'T was Eunice's voice, Jason, son,' I said — 'she was trying to let us know about something — I know it — I know it!' And I could n't keep the tears back no matter how hard I tried.

"After awhile I got a-hold o' myself again, and I told him about the Shakers and how Simeon Taylor had come in and put his hand on the fence rail, and how I did n't know but his doing it had brought back her spirit from the grave. I wish I had n't said it, — it made things worse for Jason, — for he put his own meaning to it.

"'She's not resting easy or she would n't have complained like she used to, mother,' he said, and his face was white with distress. 'She's never been avenged — all this time's gone by and she's never been avenged — after the cruel wrong done her!' And he got up and paced the floor, and no matter what I said it made no difference — he had this one thought in his mind!"

Anna Gates stopped abruptly.

They heard Jason pass through the sitting-room and go out by the front door. The two women rose quickly from their seats and peered out of the kitchen window. They saw him go and examine the fence rail first on the upper side and then on the under side. He

put his hand on it and shook it to see if it was secure — and then he stood looking at it.

"I wish I'd never said what I did, no matter what I thought!" said Anna Gates in a quavering voice as she watched her son. "See how pale his face is, Rosella! Looks as though he had n't a drop o' blood left in him!"

"Has he looked all round the window by daylight?" asked Rosella Sprague, secretly wondering how her friend could possibly pass another night in the house. Even in the daylight she was nervous sitting right there in the kitchen.

"Oh, land, yes! — he was up on a ladder when it was hardly light enough to see your hand hunting all round from the outside. He even looked up into the branches o' the maple tree that grows so close to the house. He could n't find a sign of anything anywhere — I did n't expect he would. The sound did n't come from anything earthly — I know that as well as I know I'm sitting in this chair."

"Might be 't was the wind blowing through a crack in the window casing!"

"No — no, Rosella, 't was n't like that at all!" answered Anna impatiently. "I know full well that Jason, and everybody who wants to, can come and look around as long as they've a mind to and they'll find nothing. 'T was Eunice taking on just as she used to when she was sick or when things were n't going right with her — she had wayward ways with

her 'cause we could n't help spoiling her she was so sweet and pretty! 'T was her voice we heard and she was trying to make us know something!'

The mother pressed her two hands over her heart as though it pained her. "If only we knew what 't was!" she added, choking back a sob.

Just then Jason raised his head as though a thought had struck him and he turned and hurried out of the gate. He followed along the highroad until he got to a point where a broad meadow spread out toward the southeast. Here he jumped over a stone wall and went across lots to the Kent farm on Bolton Hill.

He found Peter Kent sunning himself in a capacious armchair in front of the house, and returned his greeting absent-mindedly.

"Where's John?" he asked — "I want to find John."

"You'll find him down in the garden if I'm not mistaken," answered the old man, looking with surprise at Jason's white face and nervous manner.

"You ain't met the Shakers or been troubled with 'em, have you?" he added, evidently trying to account for them.

Jason shot a swift glance at him. "The Shakers!" he repeated as though in surprise. "What made you ask that?"

"Land sakes!" exclaimed Peter; "we ain't thought o' much else here since Johanna and Jeremiah Priest come on a visit and set to rooting up John's garden

'cause there were Shakers in it that they claimed set spells on 'em! My wife she's scared of 'em too. I did n't know but you'd met 'em and that's what made you so white about the gills."

As Jason did not answer, Peter Kent continued in a wheezy voice: "John he don't feel that way — he thinks a heap o' that Brother Simeon —"

"I want to speak with John," declared Jason, seemingly unconscious of what was being said. "I'll go find him."

He found him in the garden staking up the larkspur which was full of buds and about ready to bloom. The enclosure looked gay and trim with its green borders. The rosebushes and the lilies and the stately iris gave promise of coming beauty. Already the pansies were nodding their pretty heads in the breeze and tempting the butterflies, and the sun poured its golden rays down upon it as though it loved it.

But Jason saw none of this. Absorbed in his gloomy thoughts, the sunshine failed to penetrate his brain, nor did he see Myrtle's slight figure drop suddenly behind the wall as he put in this unexpected appearance while she was watching John work among the plants. Neither did he notice the hot flush of embarrassment that spread over his friend's face when he greeted him.

"I'm glad to find you, John," he said hurriedly — "I'm sore in need o' your help."

"My help?" questioned the latter in surprise — "what's happened to you, Jason?"

"I'm going to make another search for Zeke Stone and I want your help; you know you've sworn you'd stand back o' me, John!" He almost snapped the words out with overwrought intensity.

"Look a-here, Jason," expostulated John, "clear your mind o' this thing! Why, man, you don't seem to take note o' the years that are passing! You've no more chance o' finding Zeke Stone than though he was a needle in a bundle o' hay! More'n likely he's dead by now. He'd no money with him when he disappeared as far as they know, and he'd nowhere to go to, what's more! I'll wager the crows have bared his bones afore this!"

"Nay, such as he don't die — they live to torment the innocent," retorted Jason scornfully. "We've had what seems like a warning over to our home," he added, drawing nearer. "John Kent, I fear my sister's spirit is troubled! — it looks as though she were n't resting easy!"

John looked startled. It occurred to him that grief had affected his friend's brain.

"What do you mean by that? It don't sound reasonable to me!" He tried to speak quietly.

"Aye, maybe not, but you'd feel different if you'd been with mother and me last night! She heard just what I heard and she thought the same as I thought." And he proceeded to give an account of what had

happened to them when they went into his sister's room.

"I'm not one to be notional," he declared, "and I don't heed much what mother says about the Shakers and their ways, though I don't pretend to know about 'em, but I'm willing to give my oath that I heard what I claim I heard! 'T was Eunice! 'T was her voice same as I've heard it time and time again when things were n't right with her! and the very thought of it sets me afire! I'll tell you, John!" — Jason's voice grew loud and harsh — "I'll not go to another world and have to tell Eunice she's never been avenged! Nay! I'll not do that! Wherever the scoundrel's hiding, I'll track him down — I'll run him to earth! I'll let him know that Jason Gates, the brother, has n't forgotten!"

He turned his white face to look more closely at his friend and his words came very fast.

"You remember Eunice — how like a flower she was with her pretty winning ways? We could n't say 'no' to her at home, we all loved her so! God knows she's better dead than to have married Zeke Stone — I know that right well! but that a cur like him should dare to crush her to earth before us all! — and the minister standing there — and the neighbors assembled — you remember it, John? And my little sister in her wedding gown and veil waiting — she! — the pride of our home —"

He snapped his fingers with a gesture of fierce wrath. "'T is that that turns my heart to stone!"

"And I don't blame you!" cried John, his eyes flashing with indignation at the scene which Jason recalled to him. "There's not a man anywheres around here whose blood don't boil at the thought o' that day! And I guess," he added with some confusion, "there's no one suffers more from it than Zeke Stone's own folks. It came terrible hard on them as well as on you, Jason. I know for a fact it did."

John had moved away as far as he could from the stone wall so that Myrtle could not hear what was being said, but at this moment the question arose in his mind as to whether their voices would carry to her after all and this caused him to feel troubled and embarrassed. At his reference to Zeke Stone's family, the expression on Jason's face changed and became extraordinarily keen. He glanced about him cautiously.

"Here's what I want to say to you, John — here's what I come here for." He lowered his voice. "Sooner or later Zeke Stone's bound to come sneaking back home. I figure out that's why Eunice warned us — you mark my words. Hunger'll bring him if nothing else does — he never stuck to any kind o' work yet and he won't now, and he's bound to come back. You claim he's dead. No, I tell you — he's not dead! He's shifting about until he thinks we've forgotten — that's all."

He came a few steps nearer. "Now, what I want

o' you is to keep watch here for me while I beat round outside and drive my quarry in — do you understand? 'T won't be by daylight he'll come — he'll slip in after dark. The very moment you suspect he's anywheres round, I'll expect you to let me know. I'll arrange some way."

John's brows knit together. Here was a demand for which he was unprepared! There was a time when he would have gladly done this for his friend, but a difficulty had arisen. Much as he despised Zeke Stone and condemned his actions, he could never bring himself now to spy on the home that sheltered Myrtle. He loved her — he was sure of that.

For a moment he did not know what to say; then he took refuge in denying the need of doing what was asked of him. "Jason, man, you're daft!" he cried, apparently losing patience. "Zeke Stone'll ne'er return. If he's alive, he knows you're waiting for him. He's not one to come seeking trouble for himself. Don't all around these parts know there's a fence rail ready right on your grass plot? Nay, man — go look after your farm and clear your brain o' this! The season's getting along, and I've all I can do and more, too, and it should be the same with you. Let this thing take its course and you set to work to tend to your fields. You'll be glad later on come harvest-time."

Jason turned on him in anger. "Harvest-time!"

he cried with a bitter laugh. "What satisfaction'd we have in a big harvest if we heard Eunice, poor girl, complaining? Aye, you're all the same — every one o' you! Much as you claim you all thought o' her, you'd let her lie uneasy sooner than lose an ear off o' your cornfield! I'd thought better o' you than that, John!"

John was stooping over tying up one of his plants, but he straightened himself up to his full height when he heard this, and stood silent for a moment evidently thinking it over.

"Don't mistake me," he said finally, with a certain reserve in his tone and his face was serious. "It's no lack o' wishing to back you, Jason. You and me have grown up side by side on near-by farms and I guess I don't have to tell you I'm your friend. But here's the hitch, and I might as well speak out plain. I can't go spying on the house that covers Myrtle Stone — 't would be going against the best that's in me."

Jason flashed a look of surprise and indignation at him.

"Tush! — I might ha' known it!" he cried, snapping his fingers again in exasperation. "I seen you dance in the reel with Myrtle at Fiddler's Green! If it's linking yourself to folks that have to hide a Zeke Stone among 'em that your mind's set on, I'm sorry for you, John Kent! Where's the use o' building up the farm and growing peach orchards if you

turn right around like that and court misfortune? No luck can come to those who have Zeke Stone to deal with. I know that to my sorrow!"

Jason began to pace up and down the garden path, and then he stopped short in front of John again.

"The best thing you can do for Myrtle Stone is to free her home of an inmate like her brother Zeke, I can tell you that, man! You let him sneak back there and that girl's life 'll be naught but misery — you know that as well as I do! If you think so much of her, you'd ought to think o' that."

John did not answer at once. "I don't say you're not right," he said finally, "but I could n't spy on the home that shelters her even if my life depended on it, and there's no good thinking I could. I'm not saying I won't be back o' you, Jason Gates," he added after another pause. "I pledged myself to that should the time ever come when you needed backing — and I don't forget Eunice, no matter what you say. More than that, I'm as set as anybody that we can't have the likes o' Zeke Stone around these parts. But standing back o' you 's one thing and spying on Myrtle Stone's another, and that's something I'll never do, no matter what!"

Jason began to pace up and down again, passing his hand over his forehead as though in distress. He knew that when John spoke in that way there was no use arguing with him.

"I'll get Jude Cummings to do it," he muttered

with growing excitement. "I've no notion o' spying on Myrtle, nor yet her folks — I'm not after them — I'm after her brother Zeke, and, by Heavens! if he's alive I'll get him!"

He stopped again and seemed to be listening.

"If it's a warning that's come, I'll take heed of it," he added — "I did n't hear Eunice's voice for naught."

Little by little John had been leading him to the entrance of the garden, and he now passed through it into the meadow beyond and the two men walked in the direction of the path leading up the hill to the orchards.

Myrtle, who was still hidden behind the wall, took this chance to slip out toward the sheltering trunk of a big chestnut tree near by, and from that one to another and so on until she could safely hurry through the woodlot to her home without being seen. She was trembling with fear. All the peace and beauty of the life that had been unfolding before her seemed suddenly to melt away as in a dream and the old cloud of distress and apprehension shut out the sunshine. She had heard snatches of the conversation — enough to know that Jason was going to begin searching again and that he had heard what he believed to be a warning from his dead sister.

She did not know whether Zeke was dead or alive — she hoped he was dead. After all the trouble he had caused them, his final treatment of Eunice had

quenched as she supposed all natural affection for him. But the tie of blood is a strong one, and she found as she ran through the woodlot that her heart was beating against her breast with fear for him. If he was alive, what if he fell into the hands of Jason and the other men of the place? The thought gave spur to her feet and she hurried on faster than ever.

Sarah Stone was sitting by the window when Myrtle burst in through the kitchen door and closed it behind her. She was startled when she looked and saw her daughter's face.

"What is it?" she asked quickly, stopping her knitting — the thought of her missing son being ever first and foremost in her mind.

"Mother! Mother! Jason Gates is going to start a search for Zeke again! He's going to begin right off!"

Sarah Stone's body was leaning slightly forward in her chair. It remained immovable like a wooden image and the expression on her face seemed to stiffen into rigidity.

"To start — a search — for — Zeke — again!" she repeated slowly, as though some dread phantom she had long feared had come out from the shadows and was standing before her. She sat with fixed eyes staring at the floor. Myrtle looked at her and did not dare to tell her more — she was frightened. Suddenly her mother almost sprang from her chair and drew her tall, angular figure up to its full height.

"Nay! I'll stop that!" she cried fiercely — "I'll stop that or my name's not Sarah Stone!" And without another word she strode into the entry where her bonnet and shawl were hanging on a peg and lifted them down.

"Mother! Where are you going? What are you going to do?" cried Myrtle in a trembling voice. Somehow her mother's agitation made what she had heard seem all the more alarming.

"Never mind where I'm going," the latter answered shortly — "you stay here just where you are, and don't leave the house." And she opened the outer door. "Tell father what you heard when he comes in," she added, looking back at her daughter, "and don't you or he breathe a word o' this to a living soul — mind you don't!"

With that she left the house, and Myrtle watched her from the window take the road leading to Bolton Village.

CHAPTER VI

SARAH STONE'S ANNOUNCEMENT

There goes the good woman out of her head

SARAH STONE did not stop until she reached a small white cottage near the church. It belonged to Enoch Rust, Town Clerk of Bolton, who kept a livery stable as well. She lifted the iron knocker on the front door cautiously, and after a few moments Enoch's wife opened it.

"I'd like to speak to your husband if you've no objection," she said in a voice that sounded as though her breathing troubled her.

"He's busy now hitching up a team to take Dr. Newcome over to Shirley," answered the wife. She was evidently nursing a toothache, for she held her apron up to the side of her face.

"I won't keep him. I've an announcement to make," stated Sarah shortly. "I'll go right out to the stable and make it to him there."

Enoch's wife looked doubtful. "I dunno about that," she said, but Sarah turned about without waiting to hear more and went around the side of the house to the livery stable which stood in a good-sized yard at the back.

Enoch was adjusting the bridle on a small, meager-looking mare named "Mollie." He was a fussy man. He kept twitching and hauling at first one part of the harness and then another, admonishing her to keep

quiet as though she were a snorting, high-stepping racer.

"Whoa, Mollie! Whoa, there!" he kept aying — "Now, what ye doing? Whoa, there, I say!"

In the midst of it he looked up and saw Sarah standing in the doorway.

"If you're after a team, I ain't got one to give you — they're all out," he cried. "Whoa, Mollie! Whoa, there! What ye doing?"

"'T is n't a team I'm after," declared Sarah in an impressive tone of voice that made Enoch look at her in surprise. "I've an announcement to make, and I come here a-purpose to make it to you as Town Clerk."

In spite of her calm manner, Sarah Stone was agitated. She put her hand up to her throat and pressed it as though the words she wished to utter refused to come. "I've just heard o' the death o' my son Zeke. 'T won't matter to the folks o' these parts whether he's dead or alive, but since he's dead, 't is best they should know it. A relative o' mine who's known of his whereabouts has sent me word he passed out two nights ago, and I feel it's better so since folks would n't let him live in his home." She paused a moment as though an idea had struck her. "If that team's going to take Dr. Newcome to Shirley, maybe he'd mention it there — also if he passes through Still River 't would do no hurt to speak of it. I guess there's no more to say."

At this point Sarah's voice became unsteady, and as she turned and strode out of the stable she put her handkerchief to her eyes.

Enoch Rust was impressed, and nigh to bursting with curiosity.

"Wait a moment, Sarah Stone!" he called after her; "where's the burial to be?"

A quick flush mounted to her face, but she held her handkerchief to it, and all Enoch noticed was the slight tremor in her hand.

"Where's it to be?" she cried harshly — "well, not here! Not here where every living soul's against him! I would n't trust some of 'em not to trouble his grave!" And she moved on without answering his question.

"Yes — but look a-here, Sarah, you've got to say where he's to be laid!" cried Enoch, going to the door of the stable to call after her.

"Nay," she answered with a dry laugh that was full of bitterness, "I would n't trust any o' you to know — I'll not say where he's to be laid."

"But you've got to — you've got to!" shouted Enoch, resenting her reticence.

"He's dead, and I come here to make the announcement," was all she answered.

It was well known that Sarah Stone could keep her mouth shut against the whole Board of Selectmen, the minister and the whole countryside, if she had a mind to, and Enoch knew it as well as anybody did.

But Sarah knew Enoch. Before sundown she could count upon her announcement spreading far and near, however lacking it was in detail. So she walked swiftly back in the direction from which she had come and never turned around, though she could still hear him calling after her.

Hers was a grim figure walking along the country road. Sarah Stone was a tall, bony woman, as they called her — her length of limb gave her the look of walking on stilts and a lack of flexibility in the knee joints added to this impression. There was an uncompromising gauntness about her that repelled, and yet her keen, observant eyes at times revealed unexpected flashes of emotion which surprised those astute enough to detect them. But some called her a hard woman and would not have it otherwise.

When she passed by the path leading up to the Kent homestead, she came upon Peter Kent comfortably seated in a chair which he had brought down and placed close to the road so as to be able to "snatch a word with the passers-by," as he expressed it.

"Fine day," he called out as Sarah approached.

She did not answer, but merely gave a nod to her head which caused him considerable surprise.

"Ye have n't met any Shakers, have ye?" he asked suspiciously, with a mysterious lowering of the voice; "ye look kind of uneasy as though ye had," he added, eyeing her sharply. Sarah shook her head and did not stop. "They ain't been casting spells on

ye, have they?" he called to her, eagerly holding on to the arms of his chair. "Ye heard about Jeremiah Priest, I take it?"

Sarah stopped and then turned and came back.

"Jeremiah Priest's an old fool!" she declared shortly. "I've no patience with him — but since you're trying to find out what the matter is, I'll tell you, Peter Kent. I've just had news o' the death o' my son Zeke and I've been to announce it to Enoch Rust — I don't care to say more." Upon which she turned on her heel and continued her way down the road leaving her neighbor gasping for further information.

The heat was becoming oppressive as she walked along, and there was a feeling in the air as though a thunder-storm might come up before nightfall. The suppressed agitation under which she was laboring gave her an uncomfortable sensation in her head, and just as she was approaching her home she untied her bonnet strings and sat down by the roadside for a moment's rest in the shade of a clump of birch trees. In addition to the physical discomfort that oppressed her, a disturbing question confronted her as to how she could convincingly fill up the vacant spots in the story of her son's death which she had had the temerity to announce as a fact without giving due thought to the consequences. She suddenly realized the necessity of thinking out a definite plan before returning to her home. She knew it was imperative that her hus-

band and her daughter should both tell the same story as herself, and she knew it was better to think the matter over while she was alone. So she sat very still twisting it round and round in her mind, first this way and then that way, never noticing that a horse and rider were approaching along the road until they were within a short distance from her. When she looked up, she saw it was Jude Cummings and that he had a bag of meal strapped on to the back of his saddle. His horse was going at a slow pace on account of the heat. Jude's face grew very red when he recognized the mother of Zeke Stone. He had avoided coming face to face with her ever since that miserable day which he knew he could never forget. Poor Jude — he had secretly worshiped little Eunice Gates and her pretty ways, and the thought of the slight put upon her maddened him almost beyond endurance.

But to Sarah this was an opportunity not to be lost. As he came near, she arose from her seat and went and stood in the middle of the road holding her hand high above her head as a warning to him to stop.

"Jude Cummings," she cried in a commanding voice, "stop your horse, I've something to say! You're no friend to me and I'm no friend to you, but just the same I'll make an announcement." She paused a moment to choose her words. "Go tell Anna Gates, and go tell all who bear a grudge against

my son, that I, his mother, have received the news o' his death. He'll cause 'em no more trouble now and they need look for him no more!"

Jude looked at her in astonishment. "When did he die?" he asked bluntly — he could not bring himself to say more.

Sarah Stone's eyes flashed. "What's that to you or to all those who tried to catch him? What does that matter so long as he's dead?" she cried harshly. "Go ask the Town Clerk o' Bolton," she added. "I announced it to Enoch Rust — he'll tell you I did!"

But Jude had a practical mind. "I might meet some o' those you speak of afore I get to the village and they'll want to know," he stated, tipping his head on one side and looking at her doggedly.

Sarah felt uncomfortable under his gaze. It seemed to her that he eyed her narrowly and she wondered if he suspected her! Apprehension made her resent his question.

"He passed out two days ago, it seems," she retorted angrily, "but I have n't a doubt his shade 'll pass through this place time and again. If I was he, my ghost 'ud haunt the footsteps o' them that laid in wait for me until I'd scared the life out of 'em. 'T would n't surprise me if his did. He had a way of evening things up first and last."

Sarah did not know what impelled her to say this unless it was the spirit of retaliation that prompted her to suggest a disagreeable possibility. Jude's

manner seemed to hide a challenge and she picked it up and flung it back at him. She expected some sort of an outburst in reply, so she was surprised when he gave a long whistle and sat on his horse staring in front of him evidently in deep thought. Presently he looked at her again with a quick glance. "'T was a good thing I happened along just as you were sitting here by the roadside," he said slowly; "otherwise I'd have given Jason Gates a shock for nothing." He paused as though to make his words more impressive.

"I'm just over from Shirley way — went there to get this bag o' meal, and they're talking considerable about what Lydia Davis is saying. She claims that two nights ago she heard what sounded like your son Zeke's whistle under her window. She says she heard it plain; she says she'd know it anywhere — the poor girl's got good reason to remember it, as you know."

Jude fastened his eyes on Sarah's face. She put her hand up to hide the spasm of fear that swept over it.

"What have you to say to that?" he asked.

The shock of what she had just heard seemed to stop the beating of her heart. For a moment she could not get her voice, but she managed to regain control of herself before her agitation became too evident.

"What did I tell you? Did n't I say his shade 'ud walk?" she cried defiantly; "'t was his spirit she heard passing out!"

"His spirit!" retorted Jude scornfully; "spirits make no sound!"

But in spite of his apparent skepticism, Jude was no more free from superstitious fear than his neighbors and Sarah knew this.

"What do you talk like that for, Jude Cummings?" she exclaimed as though impatient at his words; "folks hear those sounds with an outside sense from mortal sense! If you'd been standing next Lydia Davis, like as not you would n't have heard a thing — that don't mean she did n't. Her spirit come in touch with his when he passed out — there's many has had a like experience ever since time was."

Having given this explanation, she was anxious to move on. Jude's eyes were a torment to her and she feared his questions. But as she started to go her way, he stopped her.

"So you say he's dead," he said as though still doubting her — "where's he to be laid?"

For the first time in her life Sarah Stone found her shrewd foresight deserting her. She was by nature a masterful woman, and her tart, laconic ways impressed those who came in contact with her or who tried to match their wits against hers; but then her path had usually been straight and she could cling to her point and keep the end in view — now it was deviating, and subterfuge and falsehood peered out of the unseen at her and she had to beckon them to help her.

"I'll not tell you where he's to be laid," she cried, parrying his evident suspicions — "I would n't trust you, and I would n't trust Jason Gates, nor any o' his crew! I'll see to it that he lies in peace! Zeke's dead — that's all you need to know!"

She tried to move on again, but Jude turned his horse sideways and blocked the way.

"Just the same, you'll have to prove he's dead — you'll have to prove it!" he insisted with an obstinacy that rasped her nerves.

Sarah tried to push by his horse. "I'll pass on!" she cried with an imperative gesture. "I'll say no more for you or any one!"

She felt herself losing ground.

"How about the Town Records? You'll have to put it in the Town Records!" persisted Jude with an exasperating tenacity. "They won't put it in if you don't give proof o' what you say!"

She had never thought of that. She had thought of nothing except the danger to her son should a new search be made for him. In a flash she now saw herself involved in a labyrinth of lies from which she might not have the wit to extricate herself.

But Sarah was one to speak right out leaving little time to her antagonist to lay a trap for her. And more than that, she knew the effect any direct statement produced upon the minds of the people about her. True or false it was bound to take root.

"Supposin' they don't?" she retorted quickly, and

looking at him shrewdly; "did n't they do their best to catch him and ride him out o' the town? Don't that mean they discard him as one not fit for 'em? What would they put his name on the Records for when they think he ain't fit for 'em?"

Jude was taken by surprise as these questions were thrust at him in strong, incisive tones. His mind was not a quick-moving one — its action was dependable, but moderate, and while he paused for his answer Sarah took advantage of it.

"I'm glad my son's dead and out o' his troubles," she declared, taking hold of the bridle of his horse and turning its head sharply so that she could get by, "and it don't matter to me what the townfolk think — they can't bring him back to life, anyway, and I guess they don't want to. You go tell Anna Gates what I say."

With that she strode down the road, leaving Jude to pursue his way with a puzzled mind.

When she reached it, Sarah lifted the latch on the gate and walked up the path under the shade trees to the old house that was her home. As she approached it, she saw Myrtle's wistful face appear and then as quickly disappear from the window, and she found her waiting anxiously at the door.

"Father has n't come home yet," she said in a frightened undertone as her mother dragged herself wearily across the threshold. Now that she had carried out her hurried plan to prevent a search being

made for her erring son, all Sarah's assurance of manner and her high-handed ways seemed to forsake her, and she almost staggered into the kitchen and sank into her rocking-chair.

"Mother — where've you been? I've worried — sitting here alone!" There was a tremor in Myrtle's voice. She noticed the hard, set look on her mother's face and she divined something had happened.

Sarah Stone did not answer her daughter at once. She sat looking at the floor.

"I've done the only thing I could think o' doing to keep 'em from ferreting out Zeke," she finally said, as though trying to vindicate her action; "it don't matter what others think, I knew 't was the only chance o' stopping 'em." She paused again, and Myrtle waited, holding her breath. "I've notified the Town Clerk that I've had news o' his death."

"*Mother!*" Myrtle brought her two hands to her face in dismay at what she heard.

"Well — what's the matter? Why do you say it like that?"

"But, mother — *'t is n't true!* And what's more you don't know whether he's dead or alive. If he's alive, what then?"

Sarah sat thinking and gazing at the floor.

"What else was there left to say?" she asked bitterly after a few moments. "Could I run the risk o' letting those vultures search him out? Nay," she cried harshly, "I'd rather tell the lie and lose my soul

than have a hair o' his head at the mercy o' Jason Gates!" And her hard mouth twitched suddenly with poignant emotion.

Myrtle's smooth brows were drawn together in distress and her mind was jumping quickly from one possibility to another.

"But, mother, if you're asked for a proof? What can you say if they ask for a proof?"

Sarah gave an impatient exclamation. "Tush! I'll say naught! If I hold to it now folk'll believe me. I've lived long enough to know there's lots that ain't set on proofs!"

But Myrtle could not be reconciled. Her truthful nature shrank from falsehood as joy shrinks from sorrow.

"I wish you had n't done it, mother! I wish you had n't!" she declared, unable to hide her anxiety. "If Zeke's dead, 't won't matter so much; but supposin' he is n't? Supposin' he wants to be alive and claims his right to be? And what if the neighbors should find out what you said was a falsehood — what then? We'd never be able to hold our heads up again for shame! They'd point their fingers at us! 'T would be something terrible!"

That possibility had flashed through Sarah's mind, but she had dismissed it summarily refusing to admit the likelihood of such an outcome.

"I done what I done — and I'll go through with it, come what may."

Having made this assertion she became silently absorbed in her thoughts.

Presently she shifted her position uneasily. "I'll allow there's one thing I'd sooner have otherwise," she said, leaning forward and placing her hand at the side of her mouth while she lowered her voice. "I met Jude Cummings on the road coming back from Shirley. He says Lydia Davis claims she heard a whistle under her window two nights ago that sounded like Zeke's! The girl must ha' been dreaming!"

Myrtle looked at her in alarm. "Lydia Davis said that? Why, mother, you don't think it can be *true?*"

Sarah shifted in her chair again. "Nay, nay, she was dreaming," she reiterated nervously, passing her hand over her brow — "'t is plain she was dreaming."

Myrtle looked startled and her eyes dilated. "'T is strange," she almost whispered, as though in dread of being overheard. "Jason Gates swears he heard Eunice crying last night — I heard him telling John about it. He says his mother heard her plain, same as he did! They've taken it as a warning — and that's how it come that Jason wants to search again!"

Sarah looked up at her sharply. "Where did they hear her crying?" she asked with evident anxiety — her pale face growing even paler.

"Outside the window o' Eunice's room, I heard him say."

They looked at each other suddenly with questioning eyes.

A long, constrained pause followed.

Myrtle drew a chair up to one of the windows and sat looking out at the deep shadows the trees cast upon the coarse grass surrounding the house, and at the road beyond, and Sarah sat at the other window, looking out also, with watchful eyes.

The atmosphere had become very oppressive. What breeze there had been during the morning had now died down, and not a leaf stirred on the sycamores and maples. The buzzing of a fly that was beating its body against the ceiling and the ticking of the wooden clock were the only sounds that broke the stillness of the room — gray and bare-looking, with meager, worn-out furnishings.

Although she sat motionless, Myrtle's heart was throbbing painfully. The tenuous fabric out of which she had woven her dream of happiness seemed perilously near destruction just as it was becoming a reality. She thought despairingly of the possibility of John's losing faith in all of them — even in her, should her mother's falsehood be discovered. The question of where her duty lay troubled her. She tried to think consecutively and to piece together all that she had heard, but somehow she felt as though her brain had stopped working. She found herself staring vacantly out of the window.

The afternoon wore on. Asa Randall passed the

house with some live hens in the back of his wagon. Both women watched him, their eyes following him automatically until he was out of sight. By and by Peter Kent's hired man went up the road and they watched him also.

"Father's late," Myrtle said finally in an undertone. After the long silence the sound of her voice startled her.

"Aye." — Sarah nodded an assent and relapsed into her previous state of dull meditation. An undefinable sense of something impending seemed to hang over them. Myrtle tried to shake herself free of it only to feel it settle down upon her more heavily than before. She felt smothered, and as though unable to bear it longer she arose from her chair.

"I'll go get a breath of air, mother," she said faintly; "seems as though I could n't stand this waiting any longer! What are we sitting here waiting for? I don't know and no more do you — seems as though I never felt so strangely in all my life!"

As Sarah made no reply, the girl opened the door quietly and slipped out.

An overwhelming desire to see John again and to speak with him if only for a moment took possession of her, and as though drawn by an invisible force she turned instinctively in the direction of the Kent farm and went hurrying back through the woodlot. When she emerged from the dense shadows of the trees into the golden sunshine, before her spread the

garden glowing with bright-hued flowers. In her distress of mind the spot seemed a hallowed one to her — a restful and beneficent haven. Here was where she had found the deep well of love which was overflowing her heart and which satisfied the cravings of her soul. Here every flower that bloomed seemed to her a symbol of precious thoughts as yet unspoken! And beyond the garden rose the slopes of John's hill, resplendent with acres of peach trees, all green now and rich with promise of fruit.

"John! John!" she called softly in a voice that trembled with agitation. She saw him sitting on the bank by the brook, his head on his hand as though deep in thought.

He leaped to his feet and came eagerly toward her, springing over the stone wall to reach her side.

"If you had n't come I'd ha' been heartsick, Myrtle!" he cried. Then he stopped short and looked at her intently. "You look terrible pale! Is something amiss?"

She caught her breath with emotion at seeing him.

"I don't know what ails me, John — I feel so full o' fears!" she answered piteously. "I'm full o' forebodings! When I saw the set face o' Jason Gates, I felt a heft o' trouble settling down on me and I can't seem to shake it off! I come back here just for a moment — just to — just to get away from the shadows where we live and to have a look at the sunshine and the flowers; but, John; what made you think I'd come back?"

It was his turn to become agitated now! Myrtle's sudden question and her wistful, upturned face struck at the deep places in his heart. He grew red and then pale.

"I hankered after you," he answered slowly — and there was a tremor in his voice. "I hankered so that something in me seemed to call from me to you. I thought maybe you'd sense it and come."

He came a step nearer to her.

"It's this way — you're all the world to me, Myrtle! You must ha' guessed it often, but I want to say it just the same."

The thought of what her mother had done and what might result from it swept through Myrtle's brain, poisoning the rapture that John's words stirred in her. She grew panic-stricken and covered her face with her hands in a sudden impulse of shame.

"Oh, stop, John — your folks! How would your folks feel if they heard you say that?" she stammered in distress. "They look for you to do great things, and to get rich growing peaches, and to make the best o' yourself! Like as not they'd resent having me listen to you — being Zeke's sister! Maybe they'd feel ashamed at what you're saying — but — oh, John —"

She could not finish the sentence! The sobs that arose in her throat choked her. A sudden vivid consciousness of the love she had been cherishing in her heart, which Fate now seemed threatening to snatch

away, overwhelmed her and broke down the barriers of her self-control. All the fears that had been haunting her surged into expression. She spoke at random, driving caution from her as though distraught.

Wholly unprepared for this sudden outburst, John was filled with dismay.

"Myrtle!" he cried, "what ails you? What makes you talk like that?"

He looked at her slight figure bowed over with weeping and hesitated a moment. Then he threw his cap on the ground and went and put his arms about her.

"No one could ever turn me from the one I've chosen — and that's you, Myrtle!" he protested with a ring of defiance in his tone. "Because you've got a brother like Zeke's all the more reason for me to be so's I can love and protect you! I'll choose my own bride and no one'll choose her for me, and if I searched the world over I could n't find another like you — no matter where I went!"

"I don't know what to think!" sobbed Myrtle. "I feel as though something terrible was coming! There's Jason —"

"Don't think o' Jason nor o' what he says," cried John encouragingly, trying to soothe her. "You've no call to worry about that. I don't give it a thought! He won't find Zeke!" And he touched her hair with his big hand, caressing it. "And who knows but he

may be dead?" he added, ready to foster any hope that would help dry the tears that were wringing his heart.

"But supposing that ain't true!" half whispered Myrtle distractedly; "supposing it ain't so, and they get a-hold of him — and Jason gets his way with him! John! I'd never be able to walk in the garden hand in hand with you then — nor sit under the apple tree same as we planned! Every one 'ud tell you, 'Go look for another — don't take *her*,' and then — then — the dream o' happiness 'll be over!"

He tried to take her hands away from her face.

"But look a-here, Myrtle — Myrtle, sweetheart — no matter what happens, nothing can come 'twixt you and me — if you love me same as I love you! No one can destroy our dream o' happiness! Did n't I plant the garden for you and me to walk in when the time should come? Did n't I make the seat under the apple tree for you and me to sit on? Did n't I call it Myrtle's garden in my heart? There 'll no one have a right to walk in it but you — and that I swear!"

Little by little the sobs were growing less and she let him take her hands away from her face.

"Seems as though I'd die if aught came betwixt us!" she explained, glancing first up at him and then at the beauty of the scene that surrounded them. "Everything this side o' the woodlot seems like Heaven to me!" she added gently.

John touched her soft hair again. "You have a

way o' making me sense things I never did before, Myrtle!" he said, following her glance. "Everything's taking on a meaning I never'd dreamed of — 't is one o' the things I love most in you! Take my orchards in bloom, for instance — whoever else would ha' thought o' them rejoicing! 'T is something I'll never forget!"

He smiled down at her trying to soothe her, trying to comfort her, and he felt the strain relaxing.

> Let the field be joyful and all that is in it —
> Then shall the trees of the wood rejoice . . .

murmured Myrtle, an answering smile lighting up her eyes and beautifying her face.

He gazed at her entranced and drew her closer to him.

"Myrtle," he whispered close to her ear, "'t is all right 'twixt you and me?"

The double pang of love and fear shot through her heart again.

"Aye, I love you, John, with all my heart," she admitted softly; "but wait a little — wait a little — there's things may happen — there's things about my folks you would n't understand. 'T were best to wait a little — 't is only right so!"

John looked puzzled. "I can't see what your folks have to do with it," he remonstrated; "all that matters is how 't is 'twixt you and me! Seems to me there's only one thing love can't stand up against, and that's deception, and that ain't likely to trouble

us, Myrtle! I can pretty safely venture to claim that ain't one o' my failings, and as for you — why, Myrtle, sweetheart, I think o' you as one o' those white lilies in the garden there — you could never be anything but honest, no matter what!"

"Just the same — we must wait — 't is best so, John," she faltered. The thought of her mother's falsehood weighed upon her heart.

As she spoke, a loud clap of thunder rent the air and rolled the full length of the intervale beyond Still River, rebounding from one hilltop to another. They had been too absorbed to notice that clouds had been gathering in the northwest and were coming up against the wind bulging with thunderbolts.

The trees began to rustle ominously.

"A storm's coming up from over there!" exclaimed Myrtle, startled at the sound.

"Nay, we won't get it, 't will follow the river — the sky's clear overhead and the sun's shining," said John quickly, fearing she might leave him.

"Mother's alone — she was feeling kind o' nervous when I left — I must go back, John! Nay, don't keep me!"

"Myrtle, look overhead — the sun's shining — we won't get the storm," he urged imploringly.

But another sharp clap refuted his assertion, followed by another and still another.

"I must go! I must go!" cried Myrtle, trying to free herself.

"Myrtle, wait a moment — don't leave me without saying it once more — you love me?"

"Aye, I do love you, John," she replied, just for a moment laying her cheek against his shoulder — "and I'll be thinking about you all the time; but I must n't stay longer — I must go back!"

"But, Myrtle! Myrtle! We'll be together for always some day?"

He could not bear to let go of her!

"Aye, some day — yes, yes, John!"

He bent down quickly and kissed her, and the next moment she was hastening back through the wood — away from the sunshine and into the shadows again.

CHAPTER VII

THE RETURN

The half feared, half unwelcome guest

THE thunder-storm did not expend itself quickly as usually happens after a day of extreme heat. Instead of that, long after the last faint rumbling had rolled away among the hills the sky remained covered with a sable pall out of which a soaking rain was falling. Off and on sheet lightning pierced the blackness of the night which had now closed in, illuminating the landscape for one brief and dazzling moment, making the darkness which followed seem even deeper than before.

The sound of rain dripping from the eaves of the old Stone homestead produced a feeling of depression in those within it. Sometimes the wind shook the window panes as a gust whirled unexpectedly past, leaving an apparent calm behind it. At such times Sarah Stone's eyes invariably turned in their sockets in the direction of the sound, though her body remained motionless in her chair now drawn close to a shabby-looking table on which a dim lamp was burning.

Abel Stone had sunk into a half-recumbent position upon a narrow sofa covered with black haircloth at the farther end of the room. He held his fiddle to his breast, which was his habit in times of stress, and

every now and then he picked very gently at one of the strings with his forefinger. Myrtle was seated on a low stool at the other side of the table, crocheting a tidy. Now and then she looked up, glancing first at her mother and then at her father, as quickly lowering her eyes again without a comment.

No one had spoken for some time. Finally the old fiddler broke the silence.

"Yes," he said reflectively, as though following out a train of thought upon which his mind had been dwelling, "Dr. Newcome he come along the road in a buggy and stopped his horse when he saw me — 'This is sobering news you've had, Abel Stone,' he said, drawing a long face. I had n't a notion o' what he was talking about! 'Maybe 't is for the best,' he went on, looking kind o' surprised at me saying nothing; 'but such news is always sobering!'

"I did n't know what to say, and I was scared, thinking something might have happened to you folks while I'd been away fiddling at Delia Coffey's wedding. 'I guess I don't know what you're talking about,' I said at last, reckoning it was best to own up to it without shilly-shallying. 'Why,' said he, opening his eyes wide, 'your wife's been and announced it to the Town Clerk of Bolton!'

"'Announced *what?*' said I, starting to shake all over.

"'*Why!* — that you've received word through a relative o' your son's death!'

"I come near falling down right where I was standing.

"'I'll hurry home,' said I, trying to keep up an appearance — 'I left there early this morning and the news must ha' come after I'd gone —'

"I was terribly upset, Sarah, thinking of our boy Zeke, and I have n't a doubt but I showed it. As it turns out 't was lucky I did. If I'd known how things really were, I'd never had the face —"

"How many times ha' we got to sit and listen to this, Abel Stone?" interrupted his wife irritably; "you've told it over and over ever since you came home!"

"Let father talk, mother — it helps ease his mind," said Myrtle reproachfully.

"When I was coming home thinking o' the news I'd heard and not knowing but what 't was true," he continued dreamily, "my mind run on the time when we named our boy we'd looked for so lovingly! 'T was I wanted he should be named Ezekiel, for I hankered after a son who'd prove to be a man o' vision. I thought if I gave him the name o' my favorite prophet o' Scripture, a blessing might fall on him. 'T was a sad thing, Myrtle child, when we had to own up he showed no signs of it! Seemed as though from the very first the Devil got a-hold o' him to work his will in him! We took to calling him Zeke so's not to give offense. 'T were n't fitting he should be called Ezekiel. But many a time I've prayed that some day —"

"Hush! Hush!" Sarah Stone started forward in her chair, clutching at the arms.

The others looked up in alarm.

"Mother! — what is it?" whispered Myrtle, aghast at the expression she saw on her face. The latter put a finger to her lips as a sign to keep still. Abel Stone sat upright on the sofa and Myrtle's crochet fell into her lap.

"I heard a footfall," whispered Sarah, looking toward the window — "some one's prowling round the house!"

They sat listening, holding their breath.

"It's nothing, mother," remonstrated Myrtle after a few moments' pause — "you've got your nerves all askew! 'T is the rain falling you hear!"

"Nay," she answered shaking her head, "'t was n't the rain!"

"Then 't was the wind, Sarah," asserted Abel Stone; "now and again it comes in a gust and rattles the blinds!"

Sarah shook her head again, and then gave another start.

"There!" she exclaimed huskily — "there 't is again!"

They sat as still as they could — waiting.

"I don't hear anything like what you speak of," said Abel confidently. "More'n that, 't ain't likely anybody'd choose a night like this to wander round folks' houses! Who'd you have in mind it could be,

mother?" he suddenly asked, struck by the look on her face and by the positiveness of her assertion.

"You heard Myrtle say that Jason Gates was going to start another search! It may be he!" she whispered back. "You can't tell me but he's got wind o' something and he's on the watch!" She did not say more than this.

"Father," said Myrtle in an undertone, "come with me and look out o' the door — 't will make her feel easier if we see nothing."

Fiddler Stone arose from the sofa and went on tiptoe to the door holding his friendly fiddle close to him, and Myrtle followed at his heel.

"There! There! You must hear that — you two!" exclaimed Sarah Stone hoarsely, rising precipitately from her chair.

Yes — they heard it this time — and father and daughter looked at each other askance.

"It's true, father; there was a sound — I heard it!"

"I did too!" he admitted, nodding his head. They stood still listening again.

"Open the door and look out," said Sarah unevenly; "there's no good standing here doing nothing!"

Somewhat reluctantly fiddler Stone put his hand on the latch, lifting it as noiselessly as possible, and they all peered out into the darkness. It was too black to see anything and the rain beat in their faces.

Just then, however, a flash of sheet lightning illumined the scene in front of them, and they all saw quite distinctly the shadowy figure of a man standing near the corner of the house. Myrtle clutched her father by the arm and caught her breath!

"Who's there?" called out fiddler Stone.

There was no answer.

The rain splashed in on them forcing them to close the door.

"What shall we do?" asked Myrtle, trembling with excitement; "looks as though he were watching for something, else — why'd he be standing there like that?"

They looked at each other blankly, undecided as to what they should do.

"Perhaps we'd better put the lamp out," she added, turning to her mother; "he'll think we've gone to bed and maybe he'll go off."

"Nay — we want the light to see with," the latter replied. "Open the door again, Abel — we'll see if he's still there!"

He opened it cautiously as before and again they peered into the darkness.

This time they heard a peculiar sound as of some one feeling his way along the side of the house, and they saw a figure pass through the dim shaft of light that came out through the window and disappear again. Then there was a sound of a step close at hand.

"Oh, look out, father — he may be armed!" whispered Myrtle, quickly trying to draw him back into the entry.

"What do you want?" shouted fiddler Stone. A man leapt forward out of the dark.

"Get back there!" he answered in a muffled tone. "Get back there quick!"

They fell back in alarm as he darted right at them, and before they knew it he was inside the house bolting the door!

Abel Stone put himself in the doorway of the sitting-room to block it.

"Who are you?" he shouted angrily. "What do you mean by invading my —" He stopped short, his eyes staring from his head —

"*Zeke!*" There was a ring of overwhelming dismay in the cry.

The others stood speechless, as though unable to collect their senses.

"Well — what of it?"

The answer was full of defiance. So was the attitude of the unshaven, disheveled creature that stood before them, his handsome mouth twisted into a sardonic grin.

Sarah Stone moved slowly to his side. "Zeke! — my son," she said in a tone in which fear and awe were intermingled, and stretching her arm out she laid her hand upon his shoulder. He shook it off with nervous irritability.

"I don't want no scene! I want food — I'm nigh starving!"

The mother's face was ghastly pale.

"After these long years —" she ventured, trying to put her hand on his shoulder again.

"I don't want no talk," he declared, dodging away from it — "I want food. I guess you've got a slice o' pie hidden round here somewheres. What's the matter with her?" he asked, pointing to Myrtle, who was clinging to her father's arm and had buried her face in his coat sleeve.

"Myrtle's grieving, same as we all are — same as we've been doing since the day you left us with a cloud o' shame hanging over us for your deed!" answered fiddler Stone, and his voice shook with emotion.

"I don't want no talk — I want food quick!" reiterated Zeke Stone. His manner was surly and his eyes looked unnaturally bright. It was evident that he had been living in the open for some time. A beard had grown upon his chin which almost disguised him; his clothes were ragged and had faded to earth color and hung loosely upon his emaciated body.

"Abel, let him through the door," said Sarah, taking note of these things. "Maybe he'll seem more himself when he's had something to satisfy his stomach."

They walked back into the sitting-room like

people moving in a dream. Sarah passed into the kitchen beyond, and they could hear her opening and shutting the cupboard and placing a plate and teacup on the table and fetching something from the larder. The father and daughter stood holding onto each other as though dazed in the center of the room, while Zeke went to the kitchen door and watched for the food his mother was getting for him. When half a pie and some bread and cheese and a dish of beans were placed on the table, he rushed in and fell upon them as a starved dog would fall upon a meat bone. The others followed and they watched him in silence.

The rain continued to patter against the window panes, and now and then as before a shutter creaked when the wind shook it.

Whenever it did so, they all started nervously as though some other dread thing might be in store for them.

It was after one of these gusts that Sarah spoke with ill-concealed apprehension.

"We saw a man standing by the corner o' the house — we could see him plain as could be," she said hurriedly — "are you sure there were n't some one watching when you come in, Zeke?"

His face relapsed into a broad grin. "'T was I standing there," he asserted with apparent satisfaction, and they were puzzled by his manner.

"What were you doing that for? What were you waiting for — my son?"

The relief the food gave him made him more approachable. "I was wondering if I'd give you folks a scare same way I've scared others," he replied with considerable unction.

His family interchanged anxious glances.

"Scared others!" Myrtle cried, speaking to him for the first time — "what do you mean by that, Zeke?" She trembled with dread and anger. "Don't tell me 't was true that Lydia Davis heard you give the whistle you used to call her by when you and she kept company, and right under her window! She claims she heard it."

Zeke slapped his knee and threw his head back emitting a short, dry sound indicative of supreme exultation.

"She thought 't was my ghost, I'll wager!" he declared, taking evident delight in recalling it. "She screamed loud and ran out o' the room, and I heard her run down the stairs same as though the Devil was after her! I slipped across the road into the woods and was a mile away afore she'd got her senses back!"

He seemed to find an exquisite humor in this feat, for his shoulders shook with inaudible laughter.

"Oh, Zeke! Shame! Shame!"

The reproach and indignation in Myrtle's voice only seemed to increase his ghoulish mirth.

"There's others than Lydia, I guess, I scared 'most sick!" he boasted while he devoured another section of pie.

Abel Stone lifted an arm above his head in a gesture of protest.

"What have I done that I should have a son that sees fit to scare lone women?" he exclaimed sorrowfully, and he bowed his head upon his chest as though a weight had descended upon him.

A question was on Myrtle's lips, but she hardly dared to ask it. She changed color and hesitated before speaking.

"You did n't go near the — near the Gates home — I hope?" she faltered breathlessly. Sarah's eyes were riveted upon her son. She braced herself by holding on to the back of his chair as she stood waiting to hear his answer.

He looked sharply at each one in turn — a defiant grin disfiguring his face. Then, suddenly, without warning he threw his head back like a baying hound and gave a long, complaining cry like that of a child, breaking into a peculiar sobbing sound — plaintive beyond words — that wrung the hearts of those listening.

"Oh, stop! Stop, Zeke! Oh, mother, stop him! There'll be a judgment come on him for doing such a heartless thing!"

Their dismay afforded him infinite enjoyment, and he would not stop.

"'T is like Eunice's voice!" cried Myrtle, aghast, as she sprang toward him and put her hand across his mouth. He pushed her away angrily, but he ceased his cruel mimicry.

The unpardonable insolence of it left those who heard it speechless. Abel Stone put his hand over his eyes as though to hide his face.

Myrtle was the first to recover herself.

"You've brought punishment down on your own head and whatever comes is o' your own seeking," she said, in stifled tones. "Jason Gates is on the watch for you, and after all this time he's set on starting another search for you, and who can tell what the end'll be? When they heard that crying, he and his mother thought 't was Eunice warning 'em — they believed 't was her voice they heard!"

The pupils of Zeke's eyes contracted as he looked quickly up into Myrtle's face.

"What's the meaning o' that?" he asked sharply. "Were n't Eunice there? Were n't she in her room? I done that to plague her!"

Both Abel and Sarah Stone leaned forward in astonishment to look into their son's face.

"To plague her!" stammered Myrtle. "Why, Zeke — Eunice — is dead!"

She feared he was playing a trick on her and she watched him narrowly. They had learned from experience to be on their guard.

"Dead!" fairly shouted Zeke, pushing his chair back from the table — "Eunice dead! What's that for? How come she to die?"

There could be no doubt of the genuineness of his surprise this time.

"My son Zeke," interposed fiddler Stone gravely, "you ain't trying to tell us you did n't know that poor girl died the day you was to marry her — that day when you betrayed the love and trust she had in you!"

The young man made no answer. He seemed to be turning something over in his mind. Then he brought his fist down violently upon the table.

"What did she go and do that for?" he shouted.

"Hush! Hush, Zeke! Speak low!" implored Sarah hurriedly. "You can't tell who's prowling round." And she looked anxiously in the direction of the windows.

He turned his head and looked curiously at her and then addressed Myrtle.

"What did she do that for?" he repeated.

His sister flushed painfully and her eyes flashed.

"Because o' your perfidy — that's why, Zeke!" she cried. "You who had promised to marry her — you who she thought loved her and whom she trusted in spite of the warnings given her — you played her false! And we all stood waiting for the ceremony to begin — right up there in front o' the minister — and you did n't come. And suddenly she fell in a heap onto the floor — oh, 't was a wicked thing you did that day, Zeke! — and it 'most broke our hearts!"

The look of defiance hardened his face again.

"I war n't going to put my head in a noose for any one," he asserted with bravado. "I war n't going to

let the minister bind me hand and foot for the rest o' my days! — not I!"

"You must have had a notion you loved her if you asked her to marry you," retorted Myrtle excitedly; "if you found you did n't love her, why did n't you say so in time? You done a thing no one can forgive and it's well you should know it!"

He shifted his position.

"She was ailing and it scared me!" he complained. "I'm scared o' sick folks — I'd run a mile to get away from 'em any time! Anyway," he added petulantly, "she'd no business to go dying like that — that's something she had n't ought to have done and I'll stick to it!"

Myrtle was trembling with grief and anger. She turned impulsively and took hold of her father's arm and shook it.

"Father! Father! Say something to make him understand," she entreated — "'t is terrible how he don't seem to see!"

Clasping his old worn fiddle in his arms Abel Stone looked the picture of misery. He had been standing there with his head bent low and he did not change his posture in spite of his daughter's appeal.

"'T is plain enough 't is his soul that's blind, Myrtle child," he explained sadly — "though I say it o' my own son, o' my own flesh and blood; there's no one could talk and act same as he does who had a spark o' light in his soul to see by!"

A strangely blank expression spread over Zeke's face as his father spoke and he drew up to the table again to finish his pie.

Sarah stood watching every movement.

Suddenly she spoke out. "Jason Gates is set on revenge — you'd best know it," she said.

Her son looked up at her with an insolent curl of his lip.

"I can fool 'em all!" he said with a sneer. "I could run round the country here with 'em all after me like a pack o' hounds and they could n't catch me if they ran a month! I ain't afraid!"

His mother's face twitched nervously. She spoke with greater emphasis so as to make some impression on him.

"Take heed o' what I say," she warned him. "Jason keeps a fence rail handy in his front yard, and 't is said there's tar and feathers in the barn! Zeke — my son — leave the house this night! Wherever you come from, go back there where you're safe! Jason's on the watch and the men o' the villages o' Bolton and Still River stand ready to back him when he calls on 'em. 'T is your own fault and 't is best to face facts!"

She placed an unsteady hand upon his arm in a gesture of appeal.

At the mention of the fence rail Zeke turned white in the face.

"A *fence rail!*" he muttered, glancing suspiciously

around the room and over his shoulder, and a shutter banging in the wind at that moment made him leap to his feet in a spasm of fear. He stood listening attentively. Then he gave a shrug to his shoulders and extending his arm he snapped his fingers just as he did the night at Fiddler's Green when Jason delivered his warning.

"I'll hide me here!" he declared obstinately. "I'm tired o' wood chopping! I've chopped wood till I'm sick of it along with a gang up in New Hampshire forests. If I stay here, I'll have a bed to sleep in and food to eat. I ain't afraid!"

A realization of what this would mean to them all flashed through Myrtle's bewildered brain. She thrust her two hands out before her.

"But think of us, Zeke!" she implored him — "think of us and the life we'll lead with you hiding here! Think of us going about with fear in our hearts day in and day out! Mother!" she cried, turning to Sarah, "you'd ought to tell him what you done!"

This was so unexpected that it took Sarah by surprise, and she made a quick gesture of protest.

"Nay," she declared hurriedly — "'t would do no good — best leave it as it is! 'T ain't we don't grieve to be separated from you, my son," she added, turning to him, "but I'd rather that than have you fall into the hands o' those men! Take heed o' your mother's warning and leave here before daylight."

"There's one o' your suits o' clothes in the closet

upstairs you can put on and leave those old rags behind," suggested Myrtle eagerly, "and maybe sometimes we might get some money to you — that is, if father earned enough for us to spare it."

"We'd manage it somehow," assented the old fiddler gravely; "for if you stay here, my son, sure as you're born disgrace'll come on us — they'll find you out sooner or later. You've done harm enough to us as 't is — best leave us in peace and go your way."

They urged him with eager insistence, but Zeke's obstinacy was too much for them. Finding that he was not wanted was sufficient to make him stick to his decision and refuse to go. He seated himself stubbornly in an old rocker which he pulled out from the corner of the room and declared that was where he would remain for the rest of the night.

"There's the room in the lean-to where we store things that no one 'ud think o' watching — you'd rest easier there than here," remarked Sarah, seeing they were doing more harm than good by trying to force him against his will. "'T ain't safe for you to go to your old room," she added, "for fear some one'ud find out 't was occupied. They could see a light in it plain from the road."

"I'll stay right here in this chair," was the only remark they could get out of him. It was noticeable that his eyes shifted uneasily from one part of the room to another and that some outside thought was now on his mind.

The old fiddler half suppressed a groan.

"Myrtle child," he said to his daughter — "he's starting in to plague us again! There's no telling what to look for!"

. . . . . .

Some hours after they had finally decided to leave Zeke where he was to go to their rooms to get some rest, Myrtle lay in her bed unable to sleep. Her heart was in a turmoil of rebellion. She seemed to see her fair flower of Hope being seized from her hand and trampled on by a fate that had cruelly and by circuitous ways drawn her brother back to his home where he stood like a dark shadow between her and her happiness. He had returned as impossible to deal with as when he went away — unrepentant, thinking only of himself; yet he was her own brother, and she could not betray him even to John Kent whom she loved with all her heart. Torn by the misery of these thoughts and unable to see her way clear as to how to act or what to say in order to shield his presence among them, her attention was attracted by hearing him moving about in the room beneath her. She was on the alert in a moment. Sitting up in her bed she listened attentively. Suddenly she thought she heard her name spoken in a low voice. Lighting her candle with a beating heart, she wrapped her dressing-gown about her and opening her door gently she tiptoed to the head of the stairs. At the foot she saw her brother and he beckoned her to come down.

"Mind you don't wake the old folks," she heard him caution her — "I've somewhat to say."

She crept down the stairs as noiselessly as possible with the lighted candle in her hand and stood at the door of the sitting-room where the lamp was still burning. Her brother was walking restlessly to and fro. When he saw her, he came toward her. She noticed he was greatly excited.

"If I'd ha' known she'd go dying I would n't ha' done it like I did," he said in a low voice, but with great eagerness. "How was I to know she'd go dying like that?"

Myrtle was taken aback. She could detect a distinct expression of wondering distress upon his face which contrasted strangely with his usual defiant bravado.

"You broke her heart, Zeke," was all she could find to say.

He walked up and down the room again.

"Lydia did n't! — she stuck it out," he remarked. "What was there to die about?"

Myrtle turned on him. "You spoiled everything for Lydia! She did n't die because she had her health to help her, but she's never been the same girl since! And anyway, you did n't leave her before all the neighbors same as you did Eunice!"

Her voice quivered with indignation. She noticed that he held a mesh of wires in his hand and seemed to be twisting them in and out nervously as

he paced up and down. Suddenly he stopped in front of her.

"She was a pretty creature," he said, just as though he were challenging her to deny it.

"Aye — she was, indeed," Myrtle answered, softening a little and wondering at his manner.

He then went and seated himself by the light and became absorbed in fashioning a sort of triangle out of the wire and twisting strands across it, attaching the whole to a thick layer of birch bark.

"Why, Zeke!" exclaimed Myrtle in a frightened whisper — "you've been rummaging in father's music drawer! He's just bought those wires for something — I don't know what — but you ought n't to touch his things!"

He paid no attention to her, his mind being apparently wholly taken up with what his hands were doing.

"Where's she laid?" he asked in a husky voice, after a few moments, and he turned and looked sharply at her.

"Over yonder in the burying-ground, under the big pine tree."

He did not seem inclined to say more and Myrtle turned to go back to her room. As she put her foot on the stairs he got up and hurried toward her again.

"She danced like a fairy — Eunice did!" he said in the same challenging way.

"Yes, Zeke — yes, indeed, she did."

"If I'd ha' known I would n't ha'— " he began; then he stopped. "I did n't suppose she'd die from my leaving her! I never — " But he did not finish. Instead of that, he paced up and down the room in evident agitation, mopping his brow frequently and muttering to himself. Myrtle could catch a word here and there and he seemed to be talking of Eunice.

Finally he returned to his chair by the light and resumed his work of twisting the wires across the piece of birch bark and fastening them with wooden pegs which he whittled out with astonishing accuracy and rapidity. He looked up suddenly to find her watching him.

"I'm inventing," he explained. And after that he did not speak again, but worked quickly and feverishly as though under the influence of a compelling idea, and Myrtle left him with the puzzled and troubled expression on his face which she had never seen there before.

Toward dawn she heard the side door leading outside open and shut, and a great hope swept over her that he had made up his mind to follow their advice and to leave as quickly and mysteriously as he had come. But an hour later she heard him return, and after that everything was quiet and she finally slept — worn out from the strain of what they had been through.

CHAPTER VIII

MYRTLE'S PLIGHT

On the outskirts of the forests
'Twixt the shadow and the sunshine . . .
Love is sunshine, Hate is shadow.

SARAH STONE had gauged aright the news-spreading propensities of Enoch Rust. It took but a few days for it to percolate from house to house and from farm to farm that Sarah Stone had walked right into Enoch's barn as bold as you please, and had made the announcement that a relative had notified her of her son's death and had thereupon turned on her heel and walked out again.

"Would n't say when he died!" Enoch explained excitedly to a row of eager listeners. "Would n't say where he was to be laid away! Would n't say nothing! Just come in and shot it out at me and then shut up her mouth tight as a clam!"

Every one who stopped at Enoch's barn got this bit of news to take home with him. Coupled with what was being said about Lydia Davis hearing the familiar whistle and the positive assertion made by Anna Gates that she and Jason had heard the sound of Eunice's voice lamenting, Sarah's announcement produced a profound sensation. The tragedy of Eunice Gates's wedding day was indelibly engraved upon the hearts of young and old, and the news of the death of

the worthless bridegroom of whom no one had heard for two years or more revived all the animosity stirred up against him. Sarah's secretiveness in refusing to divulge any of the particulars caused a great deal of comment and speculation. Some of the men-folks shook their heads in doubt, while the women-folks said, "Nay — Sarah Stone's a good woman for all she's close-mouthed," and they believed her story to be true. But the fact that old Israel Streeter, who lived farther down the road beyond the Stone home, heard a cart go up that way shortly before midnight and come down again just as the clock struck the hour was enough to start rumors afloat that cast a more definite light upon the whole affair. A tale spread rapidly that the body had been brought there under cover of night and secretly buried — some said under a pile of bricks in the cellar, while others asserted it was laid under the sycamore tree at the corner of the house where Sarah Stone could keep watch over it from the east window of her sitting-room. While this gruesome version was being eagerly discussed, Anna Gates was besieged by neighbors bent on hearing her account of the mysterious occurrence which had so affected her and her son Jason, and some sought out Lydia Davis and questioned her carefully concerning the whistling under her window which had frightened her into hysterics. Soon a tenuous current of superstitious fear began to pass to and fro from person to person hidden under the usual friendly

salutation as they met on the road or at Enoch Rust's barn which had now become a center of attraction. The gray hue of dread tinged the imagination of the timorous-minded, and Sarah Stone's statement to Myrtle that "there are lots o' folks don't want proofs" proved to be truer than even she realized. So it came to pass that these unexplained happenings became very generally accepted as spirit manifestations. Zeke Stone alive had been looked upon as a menace to the public peace, but Zeke Stone's shade lurking about the countryside at nightfall was enough to terrify even the most unimpressionable, and a general feeling of uneasiness prevailed in spite of skeptics like Jude Cummings. Moreover, Anna Gates's oft-repeated account of Brother Simeon's supposed incantations over the fence rail troubled the minds of many, and, though it was difficult to trace its relation to subsequent events, it added another note of mystery to the strange things that were happening in their midst.

The penalty of the false statement Sarah Stone had so defiantly made in Enoch Rust's barn was finding her out with alarming swiftness. The substance of what was being said reached her through Job Tinkham, Peter Kent's hired man, who, though bursting with curiosity, was kindly disposed. The effort to conceal the truth from him while she listened to his gossip taxed Sarah's self-control almost beyond endurance and left her exhausted and filled with over-

whelming dismay; yet she managed to preserve her grim attitude of aloofness and showed no sign of the inward agitation.

It was on one of these occasions, when Job stopped at the gate where Sarah was waiting, knowing it to be the hour when he would probably pass along the road, that he gave out the following news:

"There's been a delegation from the Meeting-House gone up to Enoch Rust's to get him to come down here and investigate the premises. I thought likely you'd want to know it so's you could tidy up the sitting-room and set things ship-shape against their coming."

Sarah acknowledged this friendly suggestion with a casual nod of her head.

"The talk runs that Zeke's body's buried in the cellar! — just as though a woman like you'd bury your own flesh and blood in a cellar!"

Sarah took note of the warning.

"Silly fools!" she snapped out laconically.

"I saw 'em going up there," he continued; "Aunt Johanna Priest and Uncle Jeremiah were leading off same as they always do — never knew 'em to fail!" So saying he went on his way and Sarah returned in haste to the house. Abel Stone was lying prostrate upon the sofa in the sitting-room — an expression of doleful resignation upon his face.

"Where's Zeke?" asked Sarah looking about nervously.

"In the storeroom — inventing," answered her husband gloomily. "He's been and ransacked my music drawer — I can't find even a fiddle string anywheres — let alone other things!"

His wife took no heed of the complaint, but passed through the kitchen and out through another door leading into the lean-to. She paused on the threshold of the storeroom and looked in. Myrtle was silently watching Zeke work with deft fingers on a delicate tracery of fine wires stretched across a small sounding-board of birch bark which he had painted green. His face as he bent over this was absorbed and quiet. The lines of furtive beauty in it, which as a rule were distorted by a defiant, crafty expression, now revealed themselves unhindered in spite of the shaggy, unkempt beard. Sarah's heart gave a throb as she noticed them and she did not speak for a moment.

"Mind he keeps hidden!" she said finally, addressing her daughter; "there's talk of a delegation coming here to nose round and see what they can see! They've concocted a notion he's buried in the cellar!"

Zeke looked up in a dazed sort of way. "What's that?" he asked curiously.

His mother changed color and hesitated — then she spoke out.

"I might as well own up now as any time, I suppose," she said in a dry, staccato voice that hid her emotion — "I've made you out as dead — Zeke —

my son! I've made the announcement to the Town Clerk o' Bolton — 't was the only way I could see o' saving you from Jason Gates. However we manage it, we've got to make out you're dead now — no matter what!"

Zeke looked at her in amazement.

"Dead!" he exclaimed resentfully. "I ain't dead! — it's Eunice that's dead!" And he threw the tool he was working with onto the table.

"We know that, my son," replied Sarah bitterly; "we've borne the sorrow o' that for a considerable time."

Myrtle had bowed her head in distress as she listened to her mother confess to what she had done, but the immediate danger of discovery which seemed to threaten them appalled her and she rose to her feet.

"Where'll he go if they come?" she asked in fear. "He must hide where they can't find him! We must plan ahead so's not to be taken by surprise!"

The ephemeral lines of beauty changed into a daredevil expression on Zeke's face. His eyes shifted from one corner of the room to the other and his lips parted in a smile that was full of cunning.

"Tell 'em to come on!" he said jeeringly — "I can give 'em a run!"

His mother walked into the room and stood beside him.

"Nay — none o' that," she said; "don't talk that

way. This is a serious state o' things that makes it no time to talk that way! If they found you, Zeke, there's no knowing — " She stopped short and her lips turned white. A loud knock on the front door was reverberating through the house! For a moment they were too frightened to move.

"It's the delegation!" cried Myrtle in smothered tones. "Mother! — say quick! what shall we do?"

Even Sarah was take. off her guard and looked wildly about for a hiding-place for her son. Zeke was the only one who kept his head. He tossed it upwards like the four-footed creatures of the woods, as though to get the scent of his enemy, and rising noiselessly he crept to the window which was open and looked out. The room was on the ground floor and a few feet away from the house was a thicket of wild shrubs. In a glance he saw where his chance of escape lay and he nodded his head as though satisfied.

"There's father gone to the door," gasped Myrtle, clasping and unclasping her hands in dismay — "I wish he'd waited for you to go, mother! He's so unsuspecting!"

It was evident that Sarah shared this opinion, for she stalked out of the room visibly disturbed and closed the door behind her. They heard her walk through the passageway into the kitchen beyond.

"Quick, Zeke! Get where you can hide! Don't leave it to the last minute!" whispered Myrtle all of a tremble.

He looked at her with scorn, confident of his instincts to elude detection, and when after a few moments they heard steps returning he deftly slipped out of the window and like a flash had disappeared.

Left alone Myrtle hurriedly tried to compose her face and, running to an old box on which a loose end of carpet was lying, she seized it and threw it over the confusion of wires and bits of wood and bark on which her brother had been working just as the handle of the door turned gently and her mother looked into the room.

"It's *John Kent!*" she whispered, putting her finger to her lips as a caution to make no noise. "He says he wants you to go and see his garden!—claims it's a blaze o' blossoms after the rain! You'd best go quick with him and get him away from here. 'T ain't his habit to come like that! Looks odd to me!"

Myrtle's heart gave a great leap in her breast and she flushed to the roots of her hair. John had never been one to come after her this way. She hesitated a moment, but her mother pushed her by the shoulder.

"Quick! Quick! Get him away from here!" she urged impatiently.

Palpitating with agitation Myrtle hurried through the kitchen to the front door.

John was standing just outside, waiting. The moment she saw him she knew he was troubled, but his greeting was a cheerful one as usual.

"I did n't know but maybe you'd like to see the

flowers all a-blooming," he explained as she looked questioningly at him; "it's a fine sight and one to be proud of."

Though he spoke calmly enough, his eyes betrayed his emotion.

"I surely would," she stammered— "I'd go a long way to see flowers a-blooming! I don't want to wait either— I'll go now!"

To be face to face with John again set her pulses beating tumultuously. In spite of her anxiety and fear, she felt as if her feet had wings so lightly did they touch the ground as she walked beside him. She glanced shyly up at him and thought how fine he was to look at — his eyes were so clear and honest and his skin was so fresh and ruddy. She noticed, too, that in the sunlight his brown hair had a glint of gold in it just as hers had. She only had to be near him to have a sense of abounding life rush through her. They were halfway across the woodlot when he turned and looked her full in the face.

"Myrtle," he said, "I've waited for you these last days and you have n't come to meet me! Why have you treated me like that?"

She was overcome with confusion and dread.

"Why — why — I've had work to do at home," she answered rather wildly trying to avoid his eyes — "I've had no time to get away — I — "

A shadow of disappointment passed over John's face.

"Be frank and outspoken with me, Myrtle," he pleaded. "You must ha' sensed it that the news that's going around would worry me considerable and keep me awake nights! Why did n't you tell me Zeke was dead when I last saw you? You must ha' known it then! Seems mighty strange to me the things you said, Myrtle, and again those you did n't say!"

She looked about her in dismay. She did not know what answer to give.

"I guess I don't know what you mean," she finally said in order to gain time.

John's face flushed.

"You're not one to take things lightly, Myrtle," he said after a short pause, "and not a little's happened since the last time we were together. I know I remember every single word you said to me and everything I said to you — I remember every look you gave me, and — and — Myrtle, I can never forget the kiss! Not if I were to live a thousand years I could never forget it — I think of it night and day!"

He stopped again and looked at her longingly; then he continued: "I would n't keep a thing from you, Myrtle — why did you keep a thing like this from me and try to mislead me? My heart has felt it like a sword thrust!"

Poor Myrtle! — she was distraught! There had been no time for her to think over how to deal with a situation like this one where her whole heart pulled

her one way and her duty and loyalty to her brother pulled her another.—Then, too, there was her mother! How could she betray her mother — even to John? By nature she was too direct to resort to subterfuge and this made her position all the more precarious. She looked up at him and then down at the ground and then up at him again, the appeal in her eyes growing more intense each time she met his searching gaze.

The sight of her confusion confirmed John's fears. He knew now that at least in part some of the current talk he had been hearing must be true. The shock of this unexpected discovery made him almost as confused as she was.

"I can see there's things you don't want me to know," he said in alarm, "but look at it this way, Myrtle — what's love if it has n't trust to lean on? 'T is naught but torment! 'T would have been better if we'd never met than suffer that! To my way o' thinking if folks love each other 't were best to let no secret stand between 'em."

As he said this all the love in his heart looked out of his eyes at her and he took one of her hands in his and held it as they walked along. His touch unnerved her and she turned deathly pale. She felt unequal to the situation.

"I don't know what's been told you, John," she said all of a tremble; "I don't know as I want to know — I guess you'd do better not to get mixed up with folks that every one's turned on. I'm not say-

ing this foolishly — I mean it — just as I meant every word when I told you I loved you, and I don't take one back neither. But it looks to me as though happiness were n't meant to come my way — and — and I'd rather die than bring unhappiness to any one — least of all you!" She said this with quivering lips.

John looked abashed and startled. "You don't trust me!" he said; "I can see you don't!"

Myrtle laid her hand over her heart as though it hurt her.

"You forget!" she cried, almost beside herself, "you forget! Did n't you swear to Jason Gates that you'd stand back o' him? Is n't Zeke my brother? I'm not defending what he done — 't was a cruel deed — I know it as well as you do; but he's my brother just the same!"

John was taken aback. "That's true enough," he assented quickly; "but if Zeke's dead, that's all passed and gone, Myrtle — we don't have to think o' that any more!"

His remark increased her agitation.

"You talk o' trust, John," she said breathlessly, avoiding falling in with what he said — "you can trust my love and loyalty, you surely can; but what does it matter to you if there's things in my family I'd sooner keep to myself? If I were your wife 't would be one thing, but I'm not that yet. I claim I owe something to my folks."

There was no answer to give to this. John's sense of justice told him that Myrtle was right — and yet —

They began to hurry toward the garden still hand in hand, but a feeling of constraint had come between them rendering them both miserable.

Before they reached the end of the woodlot, the air became sweet with the perfume of lilies. At the present juncture it was almost an agony to Myrtle to smell the exquisite fragrance which she had waited for with such tremulous longing. She remembered how ardently John had pleaded with her to walk in the garden with him and sit on the bench under the apple tree when the flowers would all be a-blooming. They were blooming now, but somehow everything seemed to be standing in the way of the fulfillment of their dream of love! They might walk in the garden this very day, but she realized with anguish that the perfect communion of spirit and the perfect understanding between them would be lacking. As they hurried along, she wondered if he also was thinking of this — she hoped he was! She hoped he was just as miserable as she was!

She was saying this to herself when the garden came into view — and she gasped at the sight that met her eyes. Here indeed was her garden of dreams! Roses and lilies, larkspur and pansies, and a border of forget-me-nots — more than that there were white poppies for sleep nodding in the breeze and beyond were the stately iris, while in the center was the circle of golden marigolds, the color of the sun!

She put her hand over her eyes to shut out the sight! With all that it stood for in her romance it was more than she could bear!

"I guess I'll not look at it to-day, John!" she half whispered — "I guess I'll not look at it to-day!"

He evidently felt the same reluctance. "We'd best walk in it some other time, I guess," he said, and let go of her hand.

This simple act caused Myrtle's heart to sink despairingly! It was as if the silver cord, invisible to the eye, that bound them together had snapped asunder. She looked up at him imploringly, but he was gazing at the garden with grave eyes.

"Yet — I'll take a flower from it with me — John — for memory's sake!" she faltered helplessly, trying to keep back her tears.

He left her side and, jumping over the stone wall now covered with climbing clematis, he took a pruning-knife out of his pocket and she watched him stoop over and cut a lily stalk, choosing one that was crowned with a weight of pure white flowers. As he did so, some instinct made her turn and look into the wood just in time to see a pale, gaunt face peer out from behind a tree and gaze with wonder and amazement at the myriad bright-hued blossoms glowing in the sunshine!

She clapped her hand over her mouth to smother the cry of terror that almost escaped her! It was Zeke hiding there! She could see enough of his face to see

it was he — reckless, inconsequent Zeke! She had to steady herself against an old tree-stump, and rack her brain to see what she could do to warn him to leave his perilous position. But before she could collect her thoughts, John had returned to her side bearing the lily stalk and he found her with eyes staring and with hands that were icy cold.

"There's a heft o' trouble bearing down — it weighs me 'most to the ground," she said hysterically as she almost seized the lilies from his hand — "I'll keep 'em."

John was almost as white as she was. "You've left naught for me to say," he said, showing by his manner how deeply her reticence wounded him; "but I'll say once again, if you'll trust me — if only you'll let me help you — Myrtle —"

"Nay — I can't! — I can't!" she cried, beside herself with alarm and involuntarily glancing in the direction where she had caught sight of her brother's face. Not seeing any sign of him anywhere, she turned to go homeward, and in spite of what seemed to him a rebuff, John started to accompany her.

"I'll see you home anyway," he remarked with a certain amount of bitterness in his tone.

"Oh, nay, John! Leave me to go alone — I want to go alone — I can't — I can't tell you why!" Myrtle wrung her hands with a beseeching gesture.

He stepped back with a flaming face and drew himself up stiffly. She thrust her two hands out to him as

though imploring him to have patience with her, but, without noticing them or uttering a word, he turned and walked quickly away from her. The unhappy girl stood abashed, her heart throbbing painfully against her breast, with eyes filled with longing and holding the lily stalk in her hand, but he did not turn around to look at her — he kept on walking toward the path leading up to the orchards and she did not dare to call him back!

Myrtle never could remember how she got back through the woodlot! — she could only recall the agony of her aching heart and the weight of her stumbling feet, from which all elasticity and strength had gone. She clung to her lily stalk as though it were a candle from some holy shrine, and with a face as white as the waxen flowers she came in sight of her home.

Her longing was to enter it unseen and get to her own little room where she could be by herself with her sorrow, where she could lay her head on her pillow and hide the tears that were already scalding her eyes. She skirted round the wild shrubbery so as to reach the side door and escape observation, when she caught sight of what she felt sure must be the delegation they had heard about that morning. With a gasp of apprehension she gained the house and, closing the door after her, she ran upstairs to her room and quickly thrust her lily stalk into her pitcher of water and then ran down again to give warning of what was coming.

CHAPTER IX

THE DELEGATION FROM THE MEETING-HOUSE

Drear old house, sagged from the weight of years,
Moss-grown, neglected. How many tears,
Gay peals of laughter — hopes and fears
In your old face reflected!
We fain would clear our eyes to see
Behind your veil of mystery.

SHE hurried from room to room. "Mother! Mother!" she called anxiously. "Where are you, mother?"

She stood still and listened. The house seemed to be empty. A sound coming from below attracted her attention and she went to the door of the cellar stairs and opened it. Abel Stone was sitting on the lower step, a picture of dejection, apparently watching his wife and son who were whispering excitedly, having just finished piling up several layers of old bricks, one on top of the other, which they had dug out of a dump heap at the other end of the cellar and had brought to a spot visible from the stairs and there constructed into a long, narrow, sinister-looking erection. The flame of a tallow candle flickered and spluttered in the damp, ill-ventilated atmosphere which was redolent of decaying vegetables and old, moulding rubbish heaps. A half-starved, mangy-looking black cat was racing over these, spitting savagely on account of having been disturbed with her litter of kittens.

Before Myrtle could give warning, a loud knock

came on the front door and a sound of voices accompanied it.

"What's that!" exclaimed Sarah sharply, standing still to listen.

"It's the delegation, mother — come up here quick!" called Myrtle in a low voice from the doorway. "They've got Enoch Rust and the minister with 'em!" She had not finished the last word before another knock came. "Quick, quick, mother!"

Those in the cellar were thrown into a state of confusion. Old fiddler Stone stumbled up the stairs muttering to himself in a ferment of agitation and ran to get his beloved fiddle, while Sarah was trying to shake off the telltale dust and cobwebs which covered her clothes. Every moment the voices outside grew louder, and evidently some of the delegation were going round to the side door as their efforts at the front door were unsuccessful.

"They're all round the house! — Oh, mother, come quick!" urged Myrtle; "they'll be trying the doors next!"

Sarah glanced about her in feverish haste.

"Where can you hide if they're all round the house, Zeke? — my son Zeke?" she whispered, frantically snatching up all the litter left from their recently finished work and throwing it upon the rubbish heaps. "Maybe you could hide behind those old barrels! It's dark there and a candle don't light up enough to see much anywheres down here!"

"Mother! They're looking in at the sitting-room window!" called Myrtle in alarm.

Knocks on the windows as well as on the door now echoed through the house. Fearing to delay longer, Sarah hurried up the cellar stairs, closing the door and turning the key in the lock. Her face was pale, but determined, and her mouth, which was drawn into a narrow slit, gave a masklike appearance to it. It was her hands that betrayed her emotion, for they shook as she smoothed her hair.

"Abel — you come stand in the entry while I open the door," she called in a low voice to her husband. She put her hand on the latch and hesitated a moment as though she dreaded the interview; then as the knocking was repeated she opened it suddenly.

"What are you folks doing beating a tattoo on the doors like that?" she asked sharply. "Can't folks have peace and quiet without being called on to let folks in that ain't welcome?"

The visitors were somewhat taken back at this reception and the challenge in Sarah's voice. They had expected her to be awed by their coming there in a body and to be ready to accommodate them.

"We're a delegation from the Meeting-House, Sarah Stone!" It was Aunt Johanna Priest who spoke, lifting up her voice before any of the men-folks had a chance to speak. "Enoch Rust and the minister'll tell you what's wanted," she added significantly,

and without further parley she pushed her way through the door right past Sarah dragging Uncle Jeremiah after her. The others followed. As though by common consent they all moved into the sitting-room. Josh Willis and his wife, who were both judged capable of sizing up a situation, were of the delegation which lacked one member — Rosella Sprague — who had not turned up when Enoch's wagon started from the village. After some shifting of chairs due to some preferring rockers and others straight backs, Uncle Jeremiah, who had seated himself in a corner of the black haircloth sofa on which his wife sat, began to make himself conspicuous by sniffing audibly through his nose.

"Smells like there's a funeral wreath in the house— sure's you're born!" he whispered hoarsely to Aunt Johanna, who started at once dilating her nostrils as though to verify the assertion. The others followed suit, and an interchange of meaning glances, accompanied by acquiescing nods, passed from one to another, as much as to say that by this discovery one point had already been scored.

"He's right!" declared Aunt Johanna in an undertone to Josh Willis's wife, "and made o' lilies too — you can't fool me!"

Sarah Stone stood on the threshold watching the intruders, her tall, angular figure drawn up to its full height while Abel looked over her shoulder, his fiddle tucked under his arm. She waited until they

were all settled, then she came to the point without mincing matters.

"What ha' you folks come nosing round here for? — you ain't come pleasuring, I presume!" She threw the question at them defiantly.

They all turned and looked at Mr. Samson, the minister, who appeared to be exceedingly embarrassed and shocked by her manner, and somewhat confused as to how he should answer her question. After a good deal of hesitation and scraping of throat he began:

"Strange things are happening round these parts," he declared in a sententious, but somewhat feeble and quavering voice. He was an elderly man and old for his years as well. "And the people are dismayed and troubled — they don't sleep the sleep of refreshment — a nervousness bordering on hysterics is prevalent — the reports of spirit manifestations both audible and spectral come daily and cause unreasoning fears, and these in the public mind are associated with your son Zeke whose death you announced to Enoch Rust, here seated, our estimable Town Clerk and neighbor!"

There was a pause during which it was evident the minister expected Sarah to say something. As she made no comment, he cleared his throat again, visibly disconcerted and resumed his speech:

"The lack of detail given concerning this demise has, I regret to say, set the whole neighborhood to

talking. Gossip and tale-bearing ill-become respectable communities! I deplore the magnitude of the regrettable lapse into ancient superstitions that cause a wagging of the tongue — the unruly member spoken of in Sacred Script! I deplore the running to and fro with news of this and that! I deplore the tittle-tattling! I deplore — "

"Land sakes!" whispered Josh Willis's wife to Aunt Johanna — "I knew 't would be just this way! — we won't get nowheres at this rate!"

Before Minister Samson had a chance to state what else he deplored, however, Uncle Jeremiah, who had been gazing abstractedly out of the window, declared in one of his raucous undertones — "Here comes Rosella Sprague on the dead run!"

They all craned their necks to see her. Sure enough there she was coming up to the front door with her bonnet hanging by the strings and her face as red as a peony from her haste to get there. The knocker gave a clang. Sarah Stone remained immovable, her face was stolid and expressionless as though she had not heard a sound. She did not even look toward the door. It was Abel who finally opened it and let Rosella in. She came stumbling into the sitting-room, crowding past Sarah, and sank into a chair.

"I dunno how far you've got on investigating," she gasped, fanning herself with her handkerchief, "but I've got something which should be made known — I run most o' the way so's to get here in time!"

Sarah's eyes shot a glance of anxious inquiry at Rosella when she made this statement.

"We have n't made a step o' headway yet," remarked Josh Willis's wife whose name was Jane, "and if these gentlemen agree to it I'd say 't was best to hear what you've got to tell before going further."

As no one vouchsafed any objections, Rosella began breathlessly:

"Last night Anna Gates woke up in a fright and felt, so she says, 'kind o' prickly all over.' She did n't know what to make of it, and as it kept on she got to thinking moving round might make her feel better, so she got up out o' her bed and it came to her to go look out o' the window to see what kind of a night it was. She lifted the shade gently so 's it would n't be noticed. She says she could n't say what made her do it that way, but she did. The moon had gone behind a cloud, but there was light enough for her to see something that got the gooseflesh to rising on her, and she says she felt her hair lift right up on her head!"

"My land, Rosella! — you gi' me the creeps!" exclaimed Aunt Johanna eagerly.

"You 'd never guess what 't was she saw!" declared Rosella excitedly — "I'm most scared to tell it — but as she looked down from her window she saw the phantom of a man sitting right astride the fence rail! She says she knows 't was a phantom! It sat there without moving, erect as could be. How long it had

been there she could n't say, because 't was there when she looked out, but she saw it as plain as day. She knew by the feeling she had there was something uncanny about it and for a while she could n't move — she just stood there looking; then she thought o' Jason, and she ran to call him to come and look, but when he got there the apparition had gone."

A murmur of wonder and dismay escaped from every member of the delegation.

"You were right to tell us this, Rosella," said Jane Willis, turning to the others to support her assertion. "I claim you were right, and it bears out what we've been a-thinking."

"Wait till you hear the rest!" exclaimed Rosella, rolling her eyes at them, "and you 'll say I was more 'n right!" She mopped her face with her handkerchief before proceeding with her news.

"Anna felt so scared thinking o' what she'd seen," she continued, "that this morning, after she'd done the housework, she come across the fields all the way up to my house and she said to me, 'Rosella,' she said, 'I want you to come to the burying-ground with me and sit a spell next to Eunice's grave. I feel as though I wanted to be near her'; and she told me about the phantom she'd seen astride the fence rail. I put my bonnet on and we went over there. It was real lovely and cool and quiet there and we sat ourselves in the shade, close to Eunice, under the big pine tree. There was a little breeze stirring and we took our

bonnets off so 's to enjoy it. We had n't been there more 'n a few minutes, though, before Anna clutched my arm. She need n't ha' done it to catch my attention 'cause I heard the same thing she did, but I kept still about it so 's to hear what she 'd say.

"'Do you hear that, Rosella?' she asked, trembling like a leaf — 'don't it sound like heavenly harps playing?'

"I felt my tongue sort o' cleaving to the roof o' my mouth which made it kind o' hard for me to answer, but I managed it somehow. 'Anna,' I said, 'I hear it plain as you do!' and we took hold of each other's hands so 's to give us courage. Why, you folks can never know how beautiful 't was to listen to!" she declared, her eyes opening to their full capacity in wonder at the recollection — "'Why,' as I said to Anna, ''t was same as though a harp from the Celestial choir was being played light as air by spirit fingers over Eunice's grave!' It sounded so faint and far away and yet it was near — like a breath o' music! When I looked up and saw the sunshine and the blue sky above, with here and there a white, fleecy cloud floating in it, and below the green grass full o' buttercups and daisies, and I heard the sound o' harpers playing on their harps as we're told of in Revelation — only this sounded as though it was just one harper — I thought to surely see the gleam of angels' wings — and I said to Anna, 'Anna,' I said, 'if this ain't heaven, what is it?'"

The delegation sat perfectly still — deeply impressed by what it heard.

"Nay, Rosella," objected Josh Willis, though he spoke gently, " 't was the wind in the pine tree you heard! Many a time I've listened to it and thought it sounded like music."

"I know what that sounds like as well as you do," retorted Rosella, shaking her head, "but this was different — and what's more you could n't seem to tell where it came from — we seemed to sense it even more 'n we heard it, but we knew it had to do with Eunice and nothing could make us feel different. I said: 'Maybe 't is some Celestial being playing a harp by her grave!' but Anna said, 'Maybe 't is Eunice herself — you can't tell!'"

There was an impressive pause.

The visitors were so absorbed in listening to Rosella that no one noticed fiddler Stone's face half hidden in the shadow as he stood behind his wife in the doorway. It was as if a light illumined it for one fleeting moment as he heard Rosella tell of the beauty of the harplike harmonies that she and Anna Gates had heard. — A sudden overwhelming suspicion flashed through his mind. "My son Zeke!" he murmured to himself with a quiver of emotion and amazement as he wondered if it could be possible for a strain of harmony to come forth out of discord!

Mr. Samson, the minister, became very restive.

"The question in hand is how to relieve our neigh-

borhood of these disturbing manifestations which are not to be encouraged, but deplored!" he stated, lifting his voice and straightening his shoulders, showing every appearance of starting to deliver a discourse on the subject. The others exchanged impatient glances, but it was Sarah Stone who without ceremony nipped the good man's intentions in the bud.

"Asking your pardon, Mr. Samson, it looks to me as though you were planning to hold a meeting right here in my sitting-room," she said stiffly. "I'd be obliged if you'd all move out onto the road and do your talking there. I did n't invite any o' you folks to come in here and discourse on spirit manifestations! It don't have anything to do with us anyway."

Enoch Rust had not spoken before, but now he broke in with some heat.

"Now, see here, Sarah Stone," he said, "there's where you make a mistake and that's what we come here for. The whole place is riled up 'cause you came to me as Town Clerk and announced the death o' your son Zeke, and you won't say where he died, nor what he died of, nor where he was buried; in fact, to sum things up, you won't say nothing! Now we here believe you to be an honest and truthful woman. We who know you believe you would n't come and announce a thing so grave if it were n't true, — and we don't doubt for a moment but it 's so,— though there 's some like Jude Cummings would have it otherwise; but ever since these strange things ha' been happen-

ing, there's been things seen and heard that scare the life out o' folks, and there's a conviction taking hold that the ghost o' your son's walking and can't settle down, and he's troubling the peace of Anna Gates so that the poor woman's distraught! You heard just now what Rosella Sprague said — only last night a phantom man was seen riding the fence rail! Well, whose shade 'ud do that other than Zeke's? 'T was meant for him in life and it seems he can't keep away from it in death, and like as not he's uneasy in spirit on account o' what he's done.

"But folks claim, Sarah, that there's more in it than that! The talk goes that your son's body is hidden on these premises, buried without a minister to lay his spirit, and the general feeling is that this can't go on — it ain't right the whole place should keep on being stirred up the way 't is now! There's poor Lydia Davis, she's had such a scare it's most gone to her head, and news come this morning that she married old Amos Gleason last night — him that lives next door and old enough to be her father, just so's to have some one to protect her and her sick mother!

"When things come to such a pass, something has to be done about it to quiet folks, and we've come here as a delegation to investigate as to the truth o' the talk that's going round. Some say the body lies under yonder sycamore tree. We've examined that and see no signs o' sods having been lifted. Others claim it's buried in the cellar, and that's what we want to look

into next — unless you're sensible and willing to own up to it if *'tis so*, in which case Minister Samson here can speak to Zeke's soul and lay it to rest."

After this long speech from Enoch, all eyes were turned on Sarah who stood erect without flinching.

"There won't one o' you step foot in my cellar," she stated emphatically, "and that's all I got to say."

They all looked askance at this refusal, and one or two of them discussed it in whispers.

"Now, look a-here, Sarah," remonstrated Josh Willis, "you'd best be accommodating. If you don't let us as a delegation examine your cellar so's to quiet folks' minds, there'll be trouble and I warn you of it. We were appointed to come here and to report on this matter and we ain't a-going back without seeing what we come for."

Sarah's mouth hardened. "There's naught for you to see in my cellar and not one o' you'll set foot in it," she declared again. Her determined manner was very disconcerting.

It was at this point that Uncle Jeremiah, who had been dozing in his corner of the black haircloth sofa, woke up and looked about him.

"The Devil's in this house," he remarked, sitting up straight.

Every one looked at him in amazement.

"Why, Jeremiah!" cried Aunt Johanna excitedly, putting her mouth to his ear; "whatever makes you say that?"

Now it is doubtful whether Uncle Jeremiah had any idea why he said it. He not infrequently made chance remarks when he woke up out of a doze, but finding that this one had made an impression he stuck to it.

"Right in this very house!" he reiterated stubbornly, looking exceeding wise.

There were signs of distinct uneasiness among those present, though no one spoke.

"I never heard him say a thing like that before," finally declared Aunt Johanna, greatly agitated; "he senses something! — the deaf do sometimes!"

The members of the delegation were not immune to the prevailing tendency of looking for spirit influences upon the slightest provocation. Even Minister Samson was not proof against it in spite of his deploring it in others. Such a positive assertion of the close proximity of the Evil One could not fail to make an impression and the faces of those sitting around the room betrayed a furtive apprehension. As though by one accord they turned and looked at the minister as being the one best fitted to cope with this particular situation.

Mr. Samson rose to his feet and coughed behind his hand.

"I am convinced," he said, "that after this plain statement from our neighbor, Jeremiah Priest, however mysteriously he acquired the information, no further obstacle will be put in the way of our visiting

the cellar of this house. Even the owner could hardly venture to leave the Evil One lurking undiscovered in any part of it. Enoch Rust," he added, turning to him, "as Town Clerk kindly lead the way — the rest of the delegation will follow."

They all rose to their feet and followed Enoch, who led the procession with some show of solemnity through the kitchen to the cellar stairs which were beyond in the entry leading to the lean-to. The move was executed so quickly that it took Sarah by surprise, and as they approached her in her position on the threshold she involuntarily stepped back, a movement that was immediately taken advantage of by the delegation which moved forward in sort of a wedge-shaped formation. Having lost her stronghold, she hurriedly made for the door leading to the cellar and took her position with her back against it shooting anger from her eyes.

The visitors halted in front of her.

Uncle Jeremiah, thoroughly elated at having so successfully drawn attention to himself, suggested lassoing her with the clothes-line and pulling her away so they could proceed, but no one heeded him.

"Woman," said Minister Samson admonishingly, "remove yourself to a suitable distance — your untoward actions only serve to bring suspicion on your head!"

But Sarah did not move. She defied them, as a lioness would in defending her whelp.

"Where's Abel Stone?" asked Enoch Rust, looking about him.

"Right here," came a voice close at hand, and the old fiddler with his daughter clinging to his arm stepped forward where all could see him. There was a gentle, simple dignity about Abel Stone, agitated though he was by the stress of the present situation, that made a distinct appeal. Primitive and untutored though he was, the music hidden in his sensitive soul, which as yet could only express itself through his sense of rhythm and his trick of fiddling, had softened the lines of his face into something akin to beauty — a perverted semblance of which sometimes flashed with startling vividness from that of his worthless son. It was well known, however, that of the two Sarah's nature was the most positive and from the first he had always let her take the lead.

"Abel Stone," said Enoch, not unkindly, "we know that this ain't pleasant for you, but can't you get Sarah round to acting more reasonable?"

The fiddler shook his head. "Nay, this is Sarah's childhood home," he replied, with quiet reserve; "it belonged to her folks five generations back; 't is no business o' mine to say whether you can go into her cellar or not — you'll have to fight it out with her! Just the same, I stand back o' Sarah, and if you go down those cellar stairs 't is without my sanction. I want that made plain. More'n that, if you'll take my advice you'll not go down 'em! — I speak as a neighbor."

They all looked startled at this and a good deal nonplussed.

"Why not, Abel? What's down there?" one of them questioned anxiously.

"That ain't for me to say," he replied gravely. "I went down there this morning and I ain't a-going again. My advice to you is to keep away from there!" And he surreptitiously gave his daughter a nudge. Abel had his own methods of fighting for the safety of his son.

"You take your own risk! — I've warned you!" he added; "I can't do more."

Sarah shot a quick glance at her husband. He sometimes surprised her.

The women of the party stepped back visibly perturbed and consulted together in undertones.

"I'm willing to do my duty as a member o' the delegation if need be," whispered Jane Willis agitatedly, "but no one ought to be asked to run risks! We can't tell what's down there!"

The others agreed with her, nodding their heads and whispering back, but when Minister Samson declared that at least the men must see the thing through, curiosity triumphed over their fears and they pledged themselves as ready to meet whatever might happen. In a body they all walked up close to Sarah, and Enoch was about to take hold of her arm when she eluded his grasp and stepped quickly to one side. With some ceremony he then unlocked the door

and opened it just wide enough to peer through the crack.

"It's as dark as a hole! We must have a light," he announced to those behind him. Deathly pale, but without saying a word Sarah went to a shelf and got the tallow candle, striking a match to light it — then she handed it to him. He in turn handed it to Minister Samson who received it with no great show of enthusiasm, but who proved his courage by starting to lead the way down the cellar stairs.

As the door opened wide, the rank odor of mould and decay greeted the nostrils of the visitors, and that, in addition to the obscurity into which they were about to descend and the note of warning given out by Abel Stone, was more than sufficient to create a palpitating apprehension that took forcible hold of their imagination, especially with the women, and it was with extreme nervousness that they descended the narrow, rickety stairway in the wake of the minister. To make matters worse, the candle he held aloft flickered and spluttered so that they could hardly pick their way down. Finally he arrived at the lower step, and then he came to a halt, holding the candle still higher above his head.

"Hi! What have we here?" he exclaimed in a sharp tone of inquiry that was mixed with alarm.

"What is it? What is it you see?" cried the others, pushing one another in an effort to see through the dingy light.

"Enoch Rust, what have we here?" the minister exclaimed again even more emphatically; and then, without waiting, the two men literally sprang from the stairs in order to examine the long, narrow erection of bricks so neatly piled one upon another, while the rest of the party clambered down tumultuously after them, Aunt Johanna holding tight onto Uncle Jeremiah, who seemed bewildered by the sudden descent into so dark and ill-smelling a place.

"Oh, my land!" gasped Jane Willis, barely suppressing a scream; "here's where he's laid!" And she gazed at the bricks with eyes wide open with fear while she and Rosella Sprague hung onto each other for support with beating hearts.

The men were greatly excited at finding so suspicious a looking object and they crowded around it. In his efforts to examine it, the minister waved the candle about so much that the light was thrown this way and that, casting strange shadows which added to the general confusion. Every one seemed to be pushing each the other and stumbling over things on the ground which they could not see; therefore when a large bat, startled by the noise and the flickering flame, flew out from its hiding-place in the wall and began swooping over their heads, the women began to scream and duck first this way, then that way. The men took their hats off and made unsuccessful lunges at it, and in so doing Josh Willis managed finally to hit it a blow that threw it right down onto

Aunt Johanna Priest's bonnet where it clung with desperate tenacity! Uttering a piercing scream, Aunt Johanna flung her arms about like a mad woman, calling wildly for some one to come to take it off! First she ran at the women, who shrieked at her not to come near them, and who fled in a panic around to the other side of the brick erection starting up the cat and all the kittens, which began racing over the garbage heaps again! Then she stumbled forward toward the men!

"Look out! Look out, Johanna! Don't get so excited!" cried Josh Willis, dodging her and bumping into Minister Samson, who uttered a loud shout of protest because his foot was stepped on. The latter held the light up in an effort to save it, and in the general jostling, mixed with strident expostulations, no one noticed Sarah Stone come hurriedly down the stairs, nor saw a hand a moment later reach stealthily out from the shadowy background and deliberately snuff out the tallow candle!

"Stand still! Don't anybody move!" shouted Josh Willis, trying to quell the tumult that followed, in the midst of which a man successfully groped his way in the darkness from a hiding-place at the farther end of the cellar and reaching the stairs went quickly up them and slipped through the door at the top. A woman followed close at his heels and closed it behind her!

Minister Samson, lifting up his voice, did his share

in exhorting the delegation to keep calm; but with Aunt Johanna frantically fighting her bat unaided in one corner, and loud cries coming from Uncle Jeremiah who had fallen into a garbage heap in another, and the terror of the other women and the smothered imprecations of the men as they groped about trying to find an exit and barking their shins against innumerable impediments that seemed to stand in their way, the scene verged on pandemonium!

Finally Sarah Stone appeared at the top of the stairs with another lighted candle in her hand.

"Whatever are you folks doing down there?" she called out stridently; "it sounds like a mad house from up here!"

"Bring the light! Bring the light!" cried the delegation in one voice, making a rush toward the stairs guided by the faint ray from the candle.

"What ha' you done with my candle I gave you?" she called sharply.

"It went out suddenly and we're here in the dark!" answered Minister Samson, agitated in spite of himself.

It was certainly a strange sight to see them come up from the cellar nor did they linger when they reached the top of the stairs. Minister Samson, limping perceptibly, remarked with some asperity, though making an effort to preserve his dignity, that further investigation would be postponed to a future occasion, and he walked with what haste he could

through the kitchen and out the front door followed by the others, whose white faces showed the wear and tear of the experience they had passed through; especially Aunt Johanna Priest, who in desperation had finally torn her bonnet from her head and flung it from her with the bat still clinging to it, and who was now bareheaded and shaking, and Uncle Jeremiah, who was covered with dirt and bits of refuse from head to foot.

"Did n't I tell 'em the Devil was in this house?" he said triumphantly addressing his wife as they hurried out of the door.

But neither she nor any of the others felt like answering; they were too eager to reach Enoch's wagon and drive away from the place as quickly as possible.

. . . . . .

Late that night when the moon was setting, Abel Stone grew wakeful and uneasy. Zeke had not returned after his narrow escape and a restless anxiety tortured him. He arose from his bed and, slipping on his clothes as quietly as possible, he went downstairs and let himself out the side door. A soft breeze was cooling the air and the calm of the night skies refreshed him. His imaginative temperament quickened as he walked along the road in hopes of discovering his son in hiding somewhere in the vicinity, and he found himself yearning with a great yearning to hear the celestial music Rosella had told of. Finding himself passing the burying-ground, he hesitated;

then groping for the little rusty iron gate, he opened it and went in. All that he could make out in the darkness was the faint line of a path, but he knew that it would lead him in the direction of Eunice's grave, so he followed it. The sky was luminous with stars, and he saw the mighty branches of the big pine tree looming up black and seemingly opaque against it.

Drawing close to it he paused. It seemed to him that the shadowy form of a man was crouching just where the grave should be, and, as he was trying to distinguish it more clearly, the branches of the tree swayed slightly in the breeze and like a breath from heaven there floated in the air a faint sound of musical chords just as Rosella had described — like spirit fingers touching a harp! A surging of tremulous wonder and joy swept through the old fiddler and he stood transfixed with rapture: the elusive tones, so faint, so far away, yet so searching mingled in harmonies of almost unearthly beauty. They seemed to pervade the air rather than to come from any one direction, as though they were a part of the breeze.

Then another sound struck his ear. It seemed to come from the crouching figure by the grave and he moved still closer and listened. The man was talking in broken sentences and his head seemed to be buried in his hands.

"I would n't ha' done it — I would n't ha' done it if I'd known you'd die of it — Eunice! — if only I had known you'd die! I done a heap o' things first

and last — bad things I know — but I would n't ha' done that!"

Abel's heart gave a great leap in his breast! It was Zeke he heard talking thus — his son Zeke! What made his voice break like that? Could it be that at last something was touching the life-spring in his dormant soul and that remorse was opening channels to his heart which had heretofore been as if hermetically sealed? Could it be that after all little Eunice Gates had not died in vain?

The old fiddler looked into the vast dome of the night sky — so wondrous to behold — so filled with the majesty of its Creator! Had her spirit descended from those realms of light — and was it hovering near that Zeke talked thus to her? he wondered; and could it be her spirit fingers that with the breeze touched the strings of the crude instrument his boy had fashioned? — for he knew in his heart that that instrument must be hidden somewheres near, a transmitter of ethereal harmonies! As he pondered over the miracle, the voice spoke again:

"I took the wires in my hand and something told me how to stretch 'em so 's the wind could sing to you — Eunice — lying here alone by yourself. I thought maybe you 'd be lonely, but now it seems as though 't was you a-playing and not the wind! I listen to it willingly — and seems I hear you singing!"

Then came a pause, and the faint harplike chords swelled in a puff of the breeze.

"If I'd ha' known you'd die — I would n't ha' done what I done!" went on the voice.

A sob rose in the throat of Abel Stone. He took his hat off of his head, and in the darkness of the night where no one could see him he knelt down upon the grass and gazed again at the spangled heavens.

"My son Zeke!" he murmured softly. "O God, I pray thee open the heart o' my son Zeke!"

After a while he rose to his feet and quietly stole away to his home.

It was just before the first streak of dawn lightened up the sky that he heard a door close and he knew that his boy had returned. Then he laid his head on his pillow and slept.

CHAPTER X

THE LOST SHEEP

A garden is a lovesome thing, God wot!
Rose plot,
Fringed pool,
Ferned grot,
The veriest school
Of peace, and yet the fool
Contends that God is not!
Not God? in gardens? when the eve is cool?
Nay, but I have a sign: —
'T is very sure God walks in mine.

It was through Peter Kent's hired man that Myrtle learned that John had gone away.

"Gone away! But where — where has he gone?" she asked tremulously with a sinking heart that was filled with dismay.

"Up-country to buy cattle. He ain't been himself lately, and he said he guessed he'd have a change and do business at the same time. We've got an extry man in to help me with the work, and Simeon Taylor, the Shaker, and that foundling boy's going to come afternoons and look to the garden. He thinks a whole lot o' that Brother Simeon, as they call him."

Myrtle did not dare ask more. Various versions of the visit to her home of the delegation from the Meeting-House had reached her ears and each one filled her with increased forebodings. Sooner or later she knew, if this went on, she and her parents would be looked upon with a dread and suspicion that would

never be dispelled. It seemed as if her mother's falsehood had entangled them in a web that threatened to pinion them down forever. The situation overwhelmed her. Unable to disclose the truth to John, out of loyalty to her brother and to her parents, she imagined he must drift away from her as surely as the sun rises and sets, but worst of all, his memory of her would be tarnished with seeming untruthfulness. This thought seemed more than she could bear, and at night she lay weeping in her bed unable to discover any way out of this terrible combination of circumstances in which Fate had cast her through no fault of her own. Her whole soul rebelled against the injustice of it, and to her overwrought and grief-stricken mind it seemed to her that the severest penalties for all her brother's misdoings were being heaped upon her head, since they were driving John away from her and leaving her life barren. Her young, sensitive face was growing thin and worn under the pressure of the fear and deception that now pervaded her home.

Peter Kent's hired man noticed the change in her as he stood at the gate talking to her.

"Jason Gates is stirred up something terrible!" he informed her. "I'd look out for him if I was you. The man's beside himself with the same hankering after revenge that's beset him these years past, and this talk o' your mother's about Zeke's being dead has made him worse instead o' better. Truth is what

with the talk the delegation's stirred up and the talk his mother's made, he don't know what to think. But Jude Cummings he claims there's no truth in any of it, and he and Jason are as thick as thieves— I'd watch both of 'em if I was you."

Such reports as these increased the fears of Myrtle and her parents, and doubly so as they were kept perpetually on edge by Zeke, who was noticeably under a tremendous strain and seemed possessed to do things fraught with the greatest danger of discovery. There were nights when he seemed to be irresistibly drawn to the Gates farm to lurk near the fence rail, though it was common talk that they were on the lookout for another appearance of the ghostly rider. This fact seemed to incite him on rather than to deter him from going there. When he felt sure that their vigil must be over and that they had retired to their beds, he would yield to the unaccountable temptation of sitting astride of it again, and there in the dark of the night hours he would remain erect and motionless. He could not have explained the extraordinary and unnatural fascination that this thing exerted over him — all he knew was that it seemed to draw him like a magnet.

At other times he would pass the night hours beside Eunice's grave. Abel Stone had followed him there again and listened with trembling intensity to his boy trying with halting words to explain himself to the spirit of the little would-be bride whom he had de-

serted. It was always, "If I'd ha' known you'd die, I would n't ha' done what I done!" — over and over again this was the burden of his cry and it grew more and more insistent as the time passed. It seemed as if the pangs of remorse which assailed him were becoming intolerable and were obsessing his soul.

They would hear him return toward dawn, while the sheltering shadows of night still lingered, and then exhausted they would sink on their pillows and get what sleep they could.

In the daytime his mind seemed occupied in trying to fashion another instrument similar to the one he made so hastily under the inspiration of coaxing the breeze to sing for little Eunice. But strange to say he found himself unable to make another that would give forth harmonies of such peculiar beauty. This was an added source of trouble and perplexity to him, and the eyes that before were wont to stare out from his face with insolent defiance now held a strange, questioning look in them as though he were in constant search of the meaning of these things that mystified him.

It was while he was working over one of these instruments in the warmth of the summer's afternoon that a whiff of delicate fragrance came through the open window that suggested something he had smelt before. Then he remembered the lily in Myrtle's room, and he lifted his head and glanced out at the sunshine flickering in and out of the leaves of the

sycamores and maples, but unable to penetrate beneath the outer branches. He laid his work aside and went and looked out of the door. A warm south wind was blowing right through the woodlot carrying with it the scent of flowers from John Kent's garden, and Zeke felt an unexpected pleasure in bending back his head and sniffing it up his nostrils, recalling as he did so the glimpse he had had of the bright-hued blossoms bathed in golden sunshine. The recollection kindled a desire to see it again.

He looked carefully around and listened. There was evidently no one about, and with the swiftness so characteristic of him he skirted the wild shrubbery and was well into the woodlot before the door had closed behind him.

Brother Simeon and Benny Mackintosh were singing together while pulling the weeds out of a bed of pansies when Zeke reached the outer edge of the wood below which the garden lay, a mass of color and perfume and bright-winged butterflies. The long afternoon shadows were just beginning to fall making the sections that basked in the sunshine dazzlingly brilliant. A purple shadow fell on the seat under the apple tree. It looked cool and inviting there, and Zeke had a sudden craving to stretch himself on the smooth green grass beneath it. Absorbed in gazing at the sight before him and in listening to the strange melody of the Shaker song, he thoughtlessly drew away from the sheltering trees and exposed himself to view more than he was conscious of.

As Brother Simeon stopped to adjust his spectacles, he caught sight of a pale face looking at them from the other side of the wall. Benny Mackintosh's sharp eye saw it also.

"'T is the robber that climbed into the sheep-fold!" he said in an undertone which had a note of alarm in it.

"Nay, nay, Brother Benny, look again!" replied Brother Simeon admonishingly; "'t is one o' the lost sheep. Thee must be quicker to see and slower to speak!"

The boy looked again at the face across the wall.

"Take no apparent heed of him," Brother Simeon continued; "'t is evident he's been lost a long while. Thee'll see he'll wander in here, and he'll find it a quiet spot to rest in."

This was said just loud enough for Zeke to hear and he shrank back in dismay at having been seen.

Quick as a flash Brother Simeon turned and looked at him.

"Have no fear, Brother," he called out cheerfully; "we are Shakers — we harbor ill to no man. Thee is safe with us wherever thee has been wandering."

The kindliness of the voice and the assurance of the words made Zeke pause. Some instinct within him told him that the Shaker had spoken the truth to him, and it gave him a new sensation. He drew a little nearer and looked at him with curiosity.

"There be some that are scared o' Shakers," he declared, speaking gruffly.

"Oh, yea," admitted Brother Simeon, pulling the weeds vigorously; "there be some that are scared o' their own shadows; and then again there are the slanderers; thee'll find both kinds 'most anywheres."

"Wolves in sheep's clothing," added Benny Mackintosh, nodding his head meditatively.

Zeke looked at the boy in astonishment. The big eyes and the outstanding ears gave him an elflike appearance that produced a peculiar effect upon him. Though small in stature and only a lad, his manner of speech seemed full of wisdom, and Zeke felt conscious of his own ignorance and shortcomings even as he looked at him. He found himself inclined to linger near these two who talked differently from any one he had ever seen, but toward whom he felt strangely and unaccountably drawn, and after walking to and fro in an aimless sort of way for a while, and then standing and watching them, first on one leg and then on the other, he suddenly without warning leapt over the wall.

Brother Simeon did not even look up, but went on clearing the pansy bed and showed no surprise.

"Sit thee down there beside the waters o' comfort," he suggested finally, pointing to the brook with his trowel; and Zeke went over and sat himself down on the bank next to the purple iris and the border of forget-me-nots. Occasionally he gave a nervous start and looked over his shoulder at them, but they seemed to have forgotten his presence.

There was a blessed calm in the garden. The rippling of the little brook made an undertone of sweet, monotonous music that was very soothing. Here and there the hum of hummingbirds, sipping of the wealth of sweetness stored up in the heart of the flowers, fell pleasantly upon the ear. The robins were already beginning to carol their evening song; he could hear them in a copse across the meadow that stretched beyond the garden; and one hardy songster perched on the topmost branch of the wild apple tree and gave forth liquid notes of exquisite beauty. Every now and then Benny Mackintosh and Brother Simeon sang together in low voices as they pulled the weeds, then they would remain silent for a time and if they spoke it was in subdued tones.

A sense of quiet different from anything he had ever yet experienced began to settle down upon Zeke and he became relaxed and drowsy.

He did not know how long he slept, but his sleep had been so deep that he could only awaken slowly, and while his eyes were still closed he became conscious of the two Shakers standing over him and discussing him.

"Did thee say his name is Zeke?" asked Benny Mackintosh curiously.

"'T is what they call him," assented Brother Simeon, who had recognized him beneath his unkempt beard; "and 't would seem 't is all he deserves as a name from what's said o' him — yet — now that I

look on his face in sleep — I seem to see where the trouble lies." He bent forward and looked with scrutiny at the outline of the features.

"Take heed, Brother, how calm the brow is that when awake is so lowering," he said, pointing at it — "and the mouth is no longer hard — 't is almost smiling. 'T is strange this gift o' sleep!" he added; "the face we're looking at is n't the one we saw across the wall — thee called that one a robber!"

The boy nodded his head in assent.

"Now, mark what I say, Benny," continued Brother Simeon solemnly — "this man thee sees lying here — his name is Ezekiel! This is not the man o' clay they call Zeke! That one's naught but one o' the devils spoken of in Scriptures that gets inside o' folks and leads 'em hither and thither doing grievous harm."

Benny was leaning down examining the face closely and with intense curiosity, and Zeke felt a hand push his hair back from his brow.

"Ezekiel — the name of a prophet!" he exclaimed askance; "why, Brother Simeon, thee must drive that old Zeke out, then!" And he twitched at the sleeve of the older man to emphasize his words. "Thee must warn this man his true name's Ezekiel! Like as not he don't know it! Maybe his parents never told him 'cause they saw him turning out to be a Zeke! He only knows the devil Zeke that's binding him!"

"Hush! Hush, boy — not so loud! He'll have to find the way to drive him out himself — there's no

one now can do it for him. But he'll find it! He'll find the way!" Brother Simeon's voice was full of confidence.

Zeke opened his eyes and saw the two Shakers standing over him. He looked questioningly into the earnest, kindly faces. Then his gaze wandered to the scene around him. It was steeped in tranquil beauty. Still drowsy, he forgot Jason and the fence rail — he forgot to sneer and cavil.

"Ezekiel?" he murmured wonderingly under his breath, and as he spoke the name he experienced a curious sensation — something seemed to respond in the inner depths of him!

"Thee can lie here quiet for a while," said Brother Simeon gently; "there'll be no one come to trouble thee. Benny Mackintosh and I are hastening home to our Shaker Village. We come again to-morrow."

Zeke let his head fall back again onto the soft grass.

"I'll stay a little longer here — by the brook you called the Waters o' Comfort," he said dreamily.

They walked quietly away and left him lying there — and he followed them with his eyes. Carrying his unbleached cotton umbrella under his arm and with his gray coat flapping, good Brother Simeon trudged along with the Shaker foundling boy by his side, and they finally passed out of sight. Zeke lay upon the grass listening, half dreaming, half waking, to the water trinkling over the stones and to the evensong of

the robins and to the strange rhythmic cadence of the frogs just beginning to pulsate now that the sun had set. The peace of the garden stilled his turbulent brain and he slept again for hours.

. . . . . .

After this Zeke sought Brother Simeon and the Shaker boy for their companionship, and little by little he told them his story. As surely as afternoon approached, he would disappear from the house and seek the garden beyond the woodlot and they would look for his coming. His bold, insolent ways dropped from him when he reached the peaceful spot, and one day he helped them weed the rose-bed.

It was the forerunner of a memorable day. That very morning Myrtle, who suspected where he went, confided it to her father.

"'T is a terrible risk he runs," she said anxiously — "what if they betray him?"

The old fiddler shook his head. "Nay, child," he said, "Simeon Taylor, the Shaker, never'd betray a living soul. He's a good man is Simeon — and the garden's safe enough while John's away; it's out o' sight and nobody goes there."

Still Myrtle looked worried.

"I saw some one standing out there in the road last night," she whispered so as not to be heard, "and I'm sure as can be 't was Jude Cummings!"

"Nay," the old fiddler said, trying to reassure her, "Jude's stirring up the folks all round to dance at

Fiddler's Green to-morrow eve. 'T is crescent moon and the night should be a fine one if the wind holds to the west. Like as not he stopped on the road to get his breath in passing."

But Myrtle shook her head. Something was portending — she felt it intuitively and a nervous uneasiness troubled her. Then there was a subtle change taking place in Zeke that mystified her. She watched him closely. His features were sharpening and his face was even whiter than before, but what gave her the most concern was the expression of his eyes — they were full of distress. In spite of all the sorrow he had caused and of the wrong he had done, she began to feel a sort of pity for him. The constant hiding, the constant fear of being discovered, was telling upon him, but more than that he seemed to be tossed in his mind, and troubled — even anguished. She had noticed it especially on this particular afternoon and shortly afterwards he had disappeared.

Brother Simeon saw him coming.

"Benny," he said, indicating the approaching figure with his trowel, "'t is written: 'The wicked are like the troubled sea when it cannot rest'; thus it is with the lost sheep Zeke thee see coming toward us!"

The foundling boy dug into the earth with his trowel for a few moments without speaking. "Yea, yea," he said thoughtfully; "but 't is also written that 'crooked things shall be made straight.' Thee read that to me yesterday, Brother Simeon — thee knows thee did."

The Shaker looked at his charge in surprise. "Thee is right, Benny!" he admitted, and he made a gesture of welcome at Zeke and smiled at him over his spectacles.

The latter sat down on a grass border close to where they were clearing up the rose-bed. He looked worn and anxious.

"The hounds are after me!" was all he said by way of greeting, and he glanced over his shoulder. His two companions sat back on their heels and looked at him in alarm. "They're closing in on me!" he added desperately, digging his nails into the palms of his hands.

They waited breathlessly for him to explain himself further.

"I can't seem to keep away from that fence rail in Jason Gates's front yard," he continued, after his eyes had quickly searched all the corners in his immediate vicinity. "Something draws me to it — I can't say what, 'cause I don't know; but seems as though I could n't keep away from it no matter what! It seems I must go and sit astride it in the night hours; and yet I never do it without a sense o' dread and the gooseflesh standing up all over me!"

"'T were best for thee to go and live away from here same as thee did before," declared Benny Mackintosh eagerly. The boy's quick sympathies were deeply aroused by the painful distress Zeke was suffering from.

"Nay," the latter said quickly, "I'm not a-going from here — I've got to be able to go talk to Eunice in the burying-ground. I try to explain just how 't is — I say to her, 'If I'd ha' known you'd die, I would n't ha' done what I done!' — and sometimes seems as though she heard me."

Brother Simeon looked at him thoughtfully. "Thee told me yesterday thee heard her answer in the music o' the wind in the wind harp."

"Aye," assented Zeke, nodding his head. "Sometimes as I sit there seems as though I heard her plain. I had no notion that tangle o' wires I stretched over a sounding-board o' birch bark and hid in the top branches o' the pine tree 'ud give forth such music — it seems strange to me!"

He leaned toward the Shaker with an expression of awe on his face that was mixed with a certain amount of fear. "How come it to?" he asked, lowering his voice — "how come it to?"

"It seems strange to thee, *Zeke* — because thee never fashioned the thing," replied Brother Simeon gravely. "'T was thee, *Ezekiel*, that had the inspiration and worked thy hands to fashion a mouthpiece through which thee hears the wind make celestial harmonies, and in those harmonies thee can hear Eunice speaking."

The Shaker arose to his feet and suddenly his face flushed and his eyes shone.

"Thee, Zeke, has tried thy utmost to deprive this

Ezekiel of his birthright!" he cried. "Ezekiel! — the name given thee at birth — Ezekiel Stone — the name written for thee in the Book o' Life to carry triumphant through this world o' sin! But see! In spite o' that devil Zeke in thee, he shows he's there — a light shining in thy darkened places! Don't keep him under longer! Don't let his light get snuffed out!"

Zeke shook himself uneasily.

"A devil in me?" he queried with a furtive look of dismay on his face.

"Thee must drive him out!" suddenly cried Benny Mackintosh, trembling with excitement and waving his hands. "Brother Simeon says no one can do it for thee — thee must do it alone! 'T is that Zeke that gives thee a hard heart and makes thee hanker to plague innocent folks that never harmed thee! 'T is he that makes life a burden to thee! Drive him out! Then thee'll feel safe."

Zeke looked at him blankly. "How can I drive him out?" he asked gruffly. "I don't sense no devil inside o' me." And an ugly frown settled on his brow.

Brother Simeon came a step or two nearer. "'T is he speaking this very moment!" he cried in warning tones — "that's his voice I hear! When thee speaks o' thy wind harp, or when thee speaks words of remorse or of Eunice Gates, 't is another voice I hear! That's the voice of Ezekiel; he it is that's *thee* — the innermost thee; the kindly man; a son o' God buried between walls o' flesh; smothered — drugged with

sleep from want of air; crowded back in thee by the devil Zeke with his surly, defiant ways who's being tracked down by Jason Gates and his neighbor friends to pay the price o' his misdeeds! Brother Benny and I have heard Ezekiel speaking; we've seen his face as thee lay sleeping in the grass; we've seen him looking out of those eyes o' yours; and 't is he we look for while we're working in the garden; 't is his hand we'd grasp in friendship — not the hand o' Zeke, the ne'er-do-weel!"

Zeke half arose from the grass where he was sitting. He was angry and troubled — and his heart was beating fast.

"I don't heed no such talk," he said sharply; "I've no devil inside o' me — I've borne the name o' Zeke from childhood up!"

"Aye! — and been a thorn in the side o' thy parents and neighbors from the beginning!" retorted the Shaker quickly; "but Benny and I ha' seen a flickering light in thee — 't is Ezekiel — the immortal man in thee!"

Brother Simeon lifted his voice loud and clear as though he were calling.

"Shine forth, Ezekiel — we ha' seen thy light!" he cried, lifting his arm high above his head.

Zeke leapt to his feet with a curse on his lips. His eyes were flashing.

"Have done! Have done!" he almost shouted, and he shrank farther away shaken by a blending of anger and superstitious fear.

Brother Simeon quickly changed his manner.

"Hold on, Brother," he said, and going over to Zeke he gently but quickly laid his hand on his shoulder.

"We are speaking to the heart o' thee — to the best that's in thee," he said earnestly. "Let us reason a moment. Thee is beset by fears; thee is miserable; thee has nowhere to turn; the man o' clay has come to the end of his rope; thy neighbors are against thee whether thee be dead or alive, and those that suspect thee to be living still clamor for revenge on thy misdeeds; they'll never rest until they find thee. Can thee live thus, with remorse eating into thy vitals within and fear o' thy brother man scourging thee from without? Nay, nay, thee can never find peace thus — and what is life without it?"

The wretched, cowering Zeke looked suddenly into the face of the Shaker.

"What can I do?" he asked breathlessly.

Brother Simeon paused a moment before answering.

"Let them have their way!" he cried with fervor, and the two men looked each other full in the face for one flashing moment.

"How do you mean?"

Zeke's voice sounded choked and the words came unevenly.

"Make the only atonement left to thee to make!" answered the Shaker with glowing zeal. "Thee can-

not bring back Eunice Gates into the world o' flesh, no matter what thee do! There's but one way to heal the sickness in thy soul and set thyself right with thy neighbor and gain peace in the end, and this is it: Give up the man o' clay they call Zeke into their hands! They cannot reach that other man Ezekiel — he is immortal and will rise up and save thee! When they ha' done their worst, 't is all they can do. Thee will have paid the penalty and be freed from bondage. Thee can start thy life anew!"

While the Shaker was speaking, Zeke's face had grown livid. He caught his breath and a trembling seized him.

"*Let Jason Gates and the others ride me on the rail! — and like as not tar and feather me?*" he stammered aghast and hardly believing what he heard. "Nay! I'll do no such thing for any man!" And he wrenched his shoulder away from Brother Simeon's hand.

"'T will bring thee peace!" the latter insisted; "and what have thee now but fear and torment o' soul?"

Zeke's eyes seemed to be starting out of his head; they looked fixedly into space and his lips twitched nervously.

"Nay! Nay!" he cried, shrinking from the scene which his imagination was creating. "Nay, I tell you — they'll kill me! No power on earth 'll make me do a thing like that!" And panic-stricken at the thought he clutched at his hair with both his hands!

"Aye, man! Pay the price o' thy misdeeds and put 'em from thee forever!" insisted Brother Simeon, exhorting him. "Thee will have satisfied the demands of thine enemies and thee can hereafter walk out in the light o' day without fear! Thee will gain peace — and a quiet mind! Supposing by chance they should kill thee, what of it? 'T is only the man o' clay they can kill. Thee will gain thy peace just the same!"

Zeke thrust his hands out before him as if entreating him to stop. His face was quivering with anguish and despair.

"Say no more!" he cried. His voice broke harshly — and he quickly turned on his heel and hurried to the other end of the garden where he flung himself down on his face upon the green bank by the brook.

Brother Simeon and the Shaker boy resumed their interrupted work and with their trowels lifted the earth up around the roots of the rose plants. They were speechless with emotion.

The afternoon stillness pervaded the garden. The myriad blossoms expanded and glowed and sent forth their perfume and the shadow of the wild apple tree crept protectingly toward the prostrate form lying upon the bank and enveloped it in its cooling folds.

A beneficent silence reigned.

After a while Zeke lifted himself up and came slowly toward the Shakers.

"Say naught!" whispered Brother Simeon excitedly to Benny — "I sense a change!"

The rebellion and defiance — even the despairing anguish — had left Zeke's face. He looked dazed as though he were in a dream.

"You spoke o' peace — and a quiet mind," he said, kneeling down next to Brother Simeon and absent-mindedly pulling up some weeds that were close to his hand.

"Aye," assented the latter gently; "'t is what I said — and out of it 'll come a kindly heart and a humble soul."

Zeke went on pulling the weeds, absorbed in thought, and he said no more.

The flowers were closing their petals and the cool damp of evening was rising when he left the garden and wandered home.

Myrtle was standing at the side door anxiously watching for him, and the moment she caught sight of him she signaled him to come cautiously and he noticed that she looked very pale.

A strange lassitude had come over him. The sense of self-preservation seemed to have suddenly become blunted and he found that he had to make an effort to reach the house quickly. When he slipped in through the doorway, Myrtle seized his arm.

"Hush! Hush, Zeke! Don't make a noise!" she urged him. "Jude Cummings is out there in the road! He's been passing by the house back and forth a dozen times or more!"

The dazed look was still on Zeke's face.

"He's tracking me down," he said, and Myrtle thought at the time his voice sounded strange, and she followed him into the sitting-room where he went and peered out of the window. Jude Cummings was standing in the middle of the road talking to a man in a wagon. His eyes were fixed on the house. A curious kind of a shiver passed through Zeke when he saw him.

"Looks like the game was up!" he said in a hoarse voice, and he dragged himself heavily to his hiding-place in the storeroom and sank exhausted upon a wooden box in the corner. Myrtle accompanied him. She was frightened at his appearance, and she kept looking into his face and wondering what it was that made him seem different from his usual self. She was puzzling over it when he called to her.

"Myrtle!"

"Yes, Zeke," she answered in a low voice.

"Come nearer — I've something I'd say."

She went up close to him and he grabbed her arm.

"Eunice — poor girl — over there in the burying-ground — I'm sorry — oh, I'm *sorry* —" He could not finish. A sob shook his entire frame. He looked up at Myrtle with a wild glance, then threw himself forward and buried his head in his hands. All the floodgates of his pent-up emotions were thrown open and the force of his remorseful sorrow nearly rocked him to pieces.

"Zeke! Zeke!" cried Myrtle, throwing herself on her knees beside him and putting her arm around his shoulder. "Zeke, my brother! Oh, thank God for this! Thank God, your heart is awake at last! Zeke my brother, my poor brother!"

His whole body was wrenched and torn by the bitter sobs until exhaustion overcame him and he half lay, half sat, on the box, limp and almost unconscious.

A slight noise at the other end of the room made Myrtle's heart jump, and she looked up frightened. It was Abel Stone, the old fiddler, who stood in the doorway hugging his precious fiddle to his breast and the tears were streaming down his pale and deeply seamed face. He came forward, and Myrtle arose from her knees and went and put her arms around his neck.

"Father," she whispered in his ear, "did you hear what he said?"

The old fiddler nodded an assent, and he went over to where his son sat and put his hand tenderly on his head and wept over him.

CHAPTER XI

ROUTING THE DEVIL

Pay all thy just debts,
Right all thy wrongs,
Give thy hands to work,
And thy heart to God.

It was evident that something was in the wind. Later on in the evening, Myrtle could make out another figure stopping in the road and looking at the house, and she felt positive it was Jason Gates. She warned her parents, and they sat up late into the night keeping watch over Zeke, who was almost in a state of collapse, while she sat in the dark in the sitting-room and watched the figures in the road. Jude Cummings had disappeared early in the evening, but he had returned, and the two men consulted together eagerly and came back and forth past the house at intervals as though waiting for some one to appear. This had gone on well into the night when they disappeared and did not return, and the anxious inmates of the house finally decided to retire to their rooms and get what rest they could in the few hours left before sunrise.

Myrtle had become so overwrought by the constant watching that when she got into bed she was unable to sink into the deep, refreshing sleep she was in need of; she could only drop off into uneasy cat-naps

from which she would awake with a start and sit up holding her breath to listen. It was on the occasion of one of these awakenings that she found an impression left upon her of having heard some one stirring in Zeke's old room, which was next to hers, and which he had never occupied since his return. In thinking it over, she seemed to recall a sound like the opening and shutting of a drawer where her mother had carefully put away his wedding suit which had been found rolled into a bundle and left in the woods on the day of the tragedy. But as everything seemed quiet after listening attentively for some time, she concluded that she had been dreaming and she went to sleep again.

It was not until the next day, after she had helped her mother with the housework, that Myrtle recalled the impression which she had put aside as part of a fitful dream. As she thought it over, however, she began to feel less sure that her conclusions had been correct, and with a sudden feeling of uneasiness and curiosity she went upstairs and entered the room from whence the noise had supposedly come. An old gray painted bureau stood against the wall facing the door, and as she went toward it her eye fell on the drippings of a tallow candle upon the floor. An uncomfortable shock of surprise went through her, and she crossed the room hurriedly and opened the drawers of the bureau. They were all empty!

She stood looking at them as one explanation after

another passed through her mind. "Whatever did he want his wedding suit for?" she asked herself, beset with curiosity through which flittered a wild hope that she did not dare express. Without attempting to answer, she ran downstairs and passed quickly through the kitchen where her mother was washing dishes at the sink, and out to the lean-to, never stopping till she reached the door of the storeroom into which she looked with eager, searching eyes. There was no one there.

The table at which Zeke was in the habit of working at his wind harp was in its usual state of disorder. Bits of wire and strips of birch bark besides fiddle strings and wooden pegs were strewn about in confusion. Noticing a package covered with papers that had been placed with evident care on the top of an old trunk in the corner, she went and looked under the coverings. It was the original wind harp that Zeke had fashioned on that first memorable night of his return and which had produced such deep emotion in those who had heard its vibrations.

So he had brought it back for safe-keeping!

Convinced that this meant some definite change of plan on his part, Myrtle hurried back to the kitchen with a beating heart. Sarah Stone was still at the sink when her daughter put a hand on her arm.

"Mother," the latter said eagerly, "Zeke's wedding suit's gone! I heard a sound in his old room last night, but I thought 't was a dream I was having, but

I've just opened the bureau drawers and there's not a thing in 'em! More'n that he's brought the wind harp back from the burying-ground, and he's got it all carefully covered with papers so's no hurt could come to it and it's on the old trunk in the storeroom where it's out o' the way! Maybe he's made his escape and left us!"

Sarah wiped her hands quickly on the roller towel by the sink and turned and looked at her daughter.

"Ain't he anywheres round?" she asked eagerly with a glint of hope in her eyes.

Great as was Sarah Stone's love for her son, the possibilities involved in the discovery of her false report of his death stood uppermost in her mind, and the two men walking in the road during the terrible night they had just passed through warned her that that discovery was now imminent.

"Whatever'd he take the suit out o' the drawer for if it were n't he was going away?" questioned Myrtle anxiously. "The one he's wearing's 'most worn out — he'd soon need another."

Sarah worked her lips nervously.

"Ain't he anywheres round?" she repeated cautiously, fearing to let her hopes outstrip her reason. "He did n't come for any breakfast," she added after a moment's thought — "but then that don't count — he's done that often."

Myrtle went to the side door and looked into the woodlot and behind the wild shrubbery; then she went out and walked around the house.

"He's not anywheres round that I can see," she said as she reëntered the kitchen. "You come to the storeroom, mother, and see how he's put the wind harp away."

Sarah Stone followed her daughter into the room used for storing away old truck of all kinds where her son had slept since his return. There was no bed in it. An old mattress, that in the daytime was kept rolled up in a corner, served as a couch for him to lie on at night. It had evidently not been used even after the vigil they had been keeping during the night that had just passed, and this fact they commented upon as significant. They looked with a sort of reverent wonder at the wind harp under the paper covering, and Myrtle was tucking the ends under it so as to keep the dust out when her mother uttered an exclamation of astonishment from the opposite corner.

"Why, he's gone and shaved his beard off! Why, Myrtle! Whatever'd he do that for?" she cried, bewildered and alarmed at the discovery. "Why, they'll get a-hold o' him in no time without his beard! Any one 'll know him! Just see here!" And Sarah pointed to a mug of soapsuds beside which lay a razor and a small mirror placed on a chair, while on the floor were strewn tufts of the black hair which had been his disguise.

They looked at each other with perplexed amazement.

"I don't see what he was thinking of!" cried Myr-

tle, terrified at the recollection of the two men who had so evidently been watching the house. "And, mother, he was so exhausted — seems as though he could n't go far, when you come to think of it!"

Sarah's eyes shifted from one end of the room to the other searching for some clue that might throw light on the subject, but she could find nothing.

"We'd best go talk it over with father," she said. "He's in the sitting-room fussing over his fiddle so's he can play to-night at Fiddler's Green — maybe he knows more'n we do."

They hurried back through the kitchen and across the entry into the sitting-room.

Abel Stone was sitting on the black haircloth sofa testing his fiddle-strings. He was so absorbed that he did not notice his wife and daughter hurrying into the room. They had to raise their voices to attract his attention.

"Abel — now, you listen!" cried Sarah Stone. "You leave that fiddle alone for a moment and listen to me. Zeke's gone and taken his wedding suit out o' the drawer upstairs — leastways we presume 't was he done it — and along with that Myrtle and I come on the fact that he's shaved his beard off! Now, what do you make o' that? Don't it look as though he'd made his escape?"

Abel Stone stared at them vaguely for a moment or two, and then his eyes had a startled look come into them as he realized what was being said. He waited some time before answering.

"That don't sound reasonable to me," he said finally; "if he was going to escape, he would n't think to shave his beard off so's folks could recognize him! There'd be no sense in that."

Sarah pondered over this.

"Well, because there'd be no sense in it don't make no difference," she argued. "Zeke don't think before he leaps and that's where the trouble's been!"

"And there's the wedding suit, father!" said Myrtle. "Whatever would he want o' that if it were n't he was going to take it away with him?"

As the old fiddler thought the matter over, his face showed alarm.

"It don't look right to me," he said emphatically. "I hope," he added, leaning forward and speaking in a loud whisper, "I hope he ain't gone and hung himself in the burying-ground! His mind was full o' trouble about Eunice last night!"

"Oh, father! That's a terrible thought!"

In the strained silence that followed it was evident that each of them regarded this as a possible explanation.

"You recollect Rudie King," continued Abel, growing nervous. "He fixed himself up same as he would for Sabbath day when he hung himself back o' the barn! Seems folks are apt to act just so."

They turned this over carefully in their minds.

"Might be you're right," admitted Sarah, working her hands together in suppressed agitation.

After a little more thought given to the subject, Abel Stone jumped up.

"I'm a-going over there to make sure! You two stay right where you are," he announced, and he put his hat on and hurried out of the house.

The two women sat down on the edge of the haircloth sofa as though ready to spring up at any moment.

"Oh, mother! 'T would be a terrible ending!" gasped Myrtle, tears suffusing her eyes. "Poor Zeke! He's been all wrong ever since I can remember. But he knows now what 't is to suffer — Eunice's dying struck him hard!"

The mother sat looking in front of her and making no comment.

Suddenly Myrtle got up and went to the window as though she saw some one outside. It was Peter Kent's hired man passing along the road.

"You sit here, mother," she said eagerly, "and I'll go see if he's anything to tell."

She was only gone a few minutes when she came running back all out of breath.

"He says Jason Gates and Jude Cummings were up to the Kent farm yesterday asking for John, and that they seemed terrible upset to find he was away. He says he heard Jason say to John's father, 'He give his word he 'd stand back o' me, and I want to get a-hold o' him quick!' Whatever did he mean by that, I wonder?"

Her question was not answered, so she went on: "When Zeke came back yesterday, he said something about the game being up and that they were on his track. Maybe he got desperate!"

Sarah put her hand up to her throat as if she felt herself choking.

"I hope father won't be long away," was all she said and her eyes sought the window.

The waiting seemed interminable. When finally they heard Abel Stone returning, they did not dare to speak or move; they sat and looked at him with anxious, questioning eyes as he entered the door.

"He were n't there!" he announced in a tone of overwhelming relief and sank into a chair mopping his brow.

A sound like a sob escaped from Sarah Stone.

"You're *sure*, father? You looked everywhere?" asked his daughter cautiously.

The fiddler nodded his head.

"There was a big nosegay o' white daisies on Eunice's grave, but we can't tell who put it there," he said, as though suddenly recalling this fact.

"Then he's gone! He's made his escape!" cried Myrtle, clapping her hands together and smiling hopefully.

For a while they were full of confidence, and it seemed as if a load had been lifted from their shoulders, and they sat down and ate their dinner with some relish. When the first effects of the sudden re-

lief had worn off, however, and they settled down to talk things over seriously, the anxiety as to his whereabouts returned. Even in the event of his escape, he no longer had the disguise of a beard, and this piece of recklessness on his part puzzled them exceedingly. Zeke was crafty in eluding his enemies, but this was a wanton defiance of danger, and the more they thought it over the more unaccountable it seemed.

Well on into the afternoon, Brother Simeon, the Shaker, and Benny Mackintosh drove down the road. Myrtle, who had seated herself at the window, noticed that they looked anxiously at the house, and she was convinced that they passed by for some special reason, for they returned almost immediately and went back up the road in the direction from which they came.

"It's time you started for the Green, father," said Sarah Stone, breaking into a long silence.

Fiddler Stone jumped up nervously. He had been so absorbed in the thought of his son that the day had slipped past without his taking account of it and his wife's reminder startled him. Soon the wagons would be coming along the road filled with pleasure-seekers bound for Fiddler's Green, and the air would be full of laughter and cheerful banterings as they passed each other in eagerness to be among the first arrivals. The sky was cloudless and gave promise of a clear, warm summer's night. There would be many to dance on the Green, and Abel Stone hurriedly tucked his fiddle under his arm and left the house.

The soft air laden with sweetness refreshed him as he walked along and took the sharp edge off of his anxiety. In spite of himself he felt hope springing up in him and pushing out the excess of fear that had been torturing him.

"Zeke's too quick for any of 'em — he'd get away somehow," he told himself with growing confidence, and by the time he reached his destination he had almost persuaded himself that he had over-exaggerated the immediate dangers of the situation.

Ezra Blood, the keeper of the tavern, nodded to him as he passed the door to take his stand at one end of the smooth, grassy sward, and remarked that all signs pointed to a fine evening. A group of young men, friends of Jason Gates, were joking and laughing vociferously near the tavern door. It was noticeable that they were somewhat over-exhilarated and prepared to enliven the dance, and they greeted the old fiddler with a volley of inconsequent pleasantries.

It was not long before the wagons and vehicles from the many outlying farms were unloading their freight of merry-makers close to the Green, and these hung their lanterns on the circle of posts in readiness for lighting later on when darkness should set in. It seemed as if the whole countryside had turned out to enjoy itself, and Abel Stone's heart warmed as he tuned his fiddle. No circumstance in life could take from him the joy of fiddling for the dance. The sound of the shuffling feet, the rhythm of the measure, the

happy laughter, the pressure of hands and the melting glances — these were sweet as nectar to his sensitive soul, and he expanded under the influence of them, and the lilt of his tunes and the ring of his voice stirred the dancers into a fever of exuberant pleasure.

The long lines of the reel were forming and young and old tapped their feet on the turf in unison while waiting to start. The air rang with happy laughter and snatches of songs.

Then Abel Stone struck his fiddle-strings and his voice rang out clearly:

Hi! come, Susan and Annie and Jane!
Twist about Nelly and turn me again!
Skip down the center and point your toes plain!
Twirl with your partner and bow to the same!
Turn your partner about!
Shake your right foot out!
Turn your partner about!
All hands round!

Oh, the joy of the dance and the lilt of the tune! How the dancers twirled and circled with tireless feet on Fiddler's Green! Flushed with the pleasure of it, as the reel continued to form again and again, down the center of it danced the couples, twisting and turning and pointing their toes while the old fiddler fiddled with tingling blood and shining eyes. He did not hear the sudden cry of fright that rang out sharply from some of the young folks, nor the exclamations of amazement that burst from the older ones, nor did he see the recoil of the dancers as they shrank

back with staring eyes from the solitary figure of a young man who had joined the reel and who was now dancing down the center alone, holding his hand high as though clasping the hand of an invisible partner. His countenance was deathly pale and his jaw was set — the beauty of his features was intensified and in his eyes was a light that was fixed and glassy. A thrill of superstitious terror surged through the dancers driving them into a state of panic.

"A ghost — a ghost!" some one cried and the crowd shrank even farther away from him. Then a man ran forward and looked at him closely. It was Jude Cummings.

"Zeke Stone!" he shouted aloud. "It's Zeke Stone — *alive!*" And beside himself with excitement, he ran to a group of men standing outside the tavern and forcibly dragged one of them to where the lonely dancer could be seen dancing in his wedding suit, and neatly shaved as though awaiting the ceremony.

"There's Jason Gates!" they cried in muffled tones as they saw him being drawn close to the dancer.

There was a pause of a moment when Jason's eyes seemed to start from his head and his face flushed a deep crimson and then grew pale; then with a leap he flung himself on Zeke Stone and dealt him a staggering blow!

It was the signal for an onslaught on the part of the young men with whom Jason had been standing, and who, already over-excited from frequent visits to the

bar, had no desire to stay their hands in meting out revenge upon the man who had deserted Jason's sister, lovely Eunice Gates, on a memorable day two years before. There was a surging and pushing among the bewildered dancers, and no one knew exactly what was taking place, but they caught a glimpse of Zeke Stone being roughly dragged away surrounded by an angry mob that was being led by Jason Gates. The women sobbed with fright and clung to each other and some one cried: "They're carrying him to the fence rail on the Reuben Gates farm!"

There seemed hardly time to take things in before half a dozen wagons overloaded with human freight were swinging past, driven at breakneck speed down the road, and many in the crowd followed running pell-mell through the clouds of dust raised by the horses' hoofs and the whirling wheels.

Fiddler Stone had stopped his fiddling, seeing that something unusual was happening among the dancers. He looked at them with blank astonishment and asked the reason of the great commotion.

"Don't tell the poor man!" one of the women cried, putting her hand on the arm of a farmer who was going toward him with the evident intention of giving him the information he asked for; and the other women joined in. "Don't tell him! — don't tell him!" they urged, feeling a pity for him. But the farmer, who was none other than Asa Randall, was obdurate, and recalling to mind that other dance at

Fiddler's Green when little fragile Eunice Gates had danced her prettiest to the admiration of all who saw her, he strode up to the father of Zeke Stone.

"How's this, Abel Stone?" he cried; "what about your son being dead and the announcement made by your wife? He's just danced down the center o' the reel as alive as he ever was right in the face of every one here! Jason Gates has got him at last! They're taking him over to the Reuben Gates farm — I guess I don't have to say more!"

The old fiddler staggered forward and would have fallen had it not been for two women who ran to his side to hold him up.

"Shame! Shame on you, Asa Randall! You'd ought to know better than to tell him that way! Ain't you a father yourself?" they cried, and they crowded round the old man to try to comfort him. But Abel straightened himself up and, pushing through the excited groups of dancers, he reached the road and, stumbling pitifully, ran after those in pursuit of the wagons that were fast disappearing in the distance.

Myrtle and her mother had been sitting at the open windows ever since Abel had left them to go to the Green. They sat silently watching the sun that was nearing the rim of Mount Wachusett across the intervale. They could just catch a glimpse of the resplendence of the golden sky through the leafy branches of the maples. Each was occupied with her own thoughts when Myrtle looked up suddenly.

"What's that noise?" she asked, sitting upright in her chair.

Sarah's body stiffened. "Sounds like trouble to me!" she declared.

They kept still and listened again with anxious faces.

"Sounds like the baying o' hounds on the scent, and yet it's human voices I hear!" said Myrtle, rising to her feet. "And it's coming nearer — I hear the clattering o' horses' hoofs! Mother, come quick! Come down to the road!"

They ran out of the house and down to the gate and looked up the road.

"I see clouds o' dust coming! Oh, what is it? What is it?" Myrtle cried, seizing her mother by the arm in terror.

The shouts of raucous voices grew deafening, and before the two women could gather their senses together, the wagons swept by at top speed jolting and swerving from one side of the road to the other as the horses plunged forward, the froth flying from their bits.

"Eunice Gates 'll be avenged at last!" shouted a voice as they passed, and a wild yell went up from the wagonloads that followed. In one swift glance Myrtle had caught sight of a drawn, white face in the midst of the shouting crowd, and the next moment the whole line of rocking wagons had swept past leaving the air filled with dust.

She felt a surging in her ears and everything seemed to grow black around her, yet she found herself running wildly down the road by the side of her mother, who, with head pitched forward and teeth clinched, was straining every muscle to get over the ground and follow in the wake of the lawless band of young men who were taking justice into their own hands.

The wagons were fast becoming mere specks in the distance.

"God help us! God help us!" sobbed Myrtle, trying to keep up with Sarah. "Mother, look out! Don't stumble! Oh, my God, what shall we do!"

The poor girl was gasping for breath and every moment feared she could go no farther, but in spite of it she kept on, her heartbeats throbbing in her throat as though they would burst it open!

Finally she thrust her hand out and clutched at her mother's arm.

"Mother! Mother! Stop one moment — just so's I can get my breath! Oh, stop, mother, just for one moment — and we'll go right on!"

They leaned against each other gasping at the side of the road, but only for a moment and they were off again.

The distance to travel seemed endless to them. Sarah Stone, oblivious of her body and thinking only of her son, never opened her lips, but sped on like a madwoman. Thus they ran, and then stopped for breath, and then ran again, until finally, more dead

than alive, they reached the highway leading on to Lancaster. The Reuben Gates farm was north of this spot, some distance farther up the road, but their strength had given out, and at this point Sarah Stone stumbled and fell. She was up on her feet again immediately, but the jar of the fall bewildered her a little and they stood still clinging to each other so as to keep their balance.

The agitation of the moment was so overwhelming that Myrtle seemed to lose her sense of reasoning, and she did not know how it happened or where he came from, but, in looking back over the road by which they had come, she saw her father climbing out of a wagon and running and stumbling toward them, and behind him, some ways back, others were running — all of them with frightened faces.

There was no opportunity for them to ask any questions, for just then a tumult broke loose up the road in the direction of the Gates farm. The sound of it chilled the blood in their veins, and like frightened creatures that had lost their wits they ran first this way and then that way, bewildered and terrified.

The noise was coming rapidly nearer, and down the highway came a crowd of men grouped together on the full run, jeering, shouting, cursing, swearing, and carrying aloft the sharp-cornered, ragged fence rail, astride of which clung a horrible-looking object besmeared with a coat of tar bristling with feathers which they tossed and jolted up and down without

mercy. Beside it, showing his teeth and with an almost fanatical glitter in his eyes, ran Jason Gates, pelting it with dirt and stones. The head alone had been left free of tar, and Zeke's livid face shone out like a white spot in the gathering dusk. At the sight Sarah Stone, the mother, uttered a loud scream and rushed wildly into the crowd only to be thrown back with warning shouts directed at her to keep away. But she would not be put off; she kept up with them trying to force her way to the side of her son, while Myrtle ran at the edge of the road followed by the old fiddler. On they pushed, the crowd becoming fiercer as it sped along.

Exhausted with suffering, Zeke looked as if he would succumb any moment, though he had managed so far not to let a sound escape his lips, when out from the bushes bordering the road burst Brother Simeon, the Shaker, and Benny Mackintosh.

"Hi! Keep thy courage up, Brother Ezekiel!" the Shaker cried, waving his cotten umbrella and running abreast of his suffering friend, with his gray coat flying and his round, kindly face crimson from the strenuous exertion. "Keep thy courage up! All is well — the old Zeke is dead — he will no longer trouble thee! Thee has paid the price o' thy wrongdoings! Hi! Ezekiel! Ezekiel!"

Evidently the sound of Brother Simeon's voice reached him in his misery, for Zeke lifted his head suddenly as though he had heard a challenge and he clung on desperately, clinching his jaws.

"Ezekiel!" cried the high-pitched voice of Benny Mackintosh — "Brother Ezekiel! Thee is safe! Never mind thy house o' clay — 't is but made o' dust — but thee — thee is safe at last! Thee has routed the Devil!"

"The Shakers!" roared one of the men in a voice that rang with anger and fear combined, and he threw a stone that hit Benny on the forehead so that the blood flowed. The boy tripped and fell, but he scrambled to his feet again and ran as hard as he could so as to keep up with Brother Simeon who exhorted him to rejoice in his injury.

Abel Stone, unable to run farther, staggered to the side of the road and collapsed into a crumpled heap.

Myrtle ran back to assist him.

"Father, dear! Father, dear! We're helpless to aid him — the crowd's too much for us! Don't try to go on. Brother Simeon can help him more 'n we can!" she cried in broken sentences, kneeling down beside him to hold his head on her arm so that he could get his breath.

"Nay! Nay! Go on, Myrtle! Leave me here! Go stand back o' your brother! Oh, my boy Zeke! My boy Zeke!" cried the old fiddler, wringing his hands in an agony of grief and signing her to follow the crowd.

Obedient to his command, the girl, all of a tremble with terror and fatigue, arose to her feet again and pushed on trying to catch up with the jeering, hoot-

ing mob which was being driven into a fury by the inciting cries of Jason Gates.

They were now nearing the town line, and Brother Simeon was shouting words of encouragement, while above all the confusion of voices rang the high-pitched, boyish tones of Benny Mackintosh:

"Ezekiel! Brother Ezekiel! Keep up thy courage! The end is near! Thee has righted thy wrong! Thee has won the victory!"

They saw the grotesque form astride the rail grow limp as it jolted up and down; the head hanging forward and swinging from side to side, and just as the crowd had crossed the dividing line between Bolton and Lancaster, it pitched downward and fell upon the ground.

The men came to a halt.

Before they realized in full what had happened, Sarah Stone had staggered forward and thrown herself upon the unsightly heap that was her son, and, unmindful of the tar and the feathers and the dirt and blood that was caked all over his body, she clasped her arms about it trying to hide it with her own while her shoulders heaved painfully as her breath came in labored gasps. She turned her head and looked up at Jason Gates with the look of a dumb animal that has been driven to the wall, but is still defiant.

As he took a step forward, she flung out an arm in protest and her lips moved, but no sound came from them.

Brother Simeon had pushed his way in to where Zeke was lying and he saw Jason's movement and Sarah's frantic gesture.

"Hold still, Jason Gates!" he cried. "Thee has satisfied thy craving for revenge — thee cannot ask for more!"

"I have avenged my sister Eunice Gates!" replied Jason heatedly, drawing himself up to his full height and throwing his head back proudly.

"Nay!" cried Brother Simeon, shaking his finger at him, his blue eyes glowing with the light of exaltation, "she was avenged before ever *thee* got hold o' him, Jason Gates! 'T was the thought o' Eunice dead that made him suffer so he gave himself up into thy hands — a willing victim so's to save his soul and gain his peace o' mind! 'T is Eunice who 'll bring him out o' darkness into light — not thee and thy fence rail! *Thee* with earthly ignorance has tried to cow the man in him. *She* with heavenly wisdom has sought to stir the soul in him! *Thee* has wreaked thy vengeance on his house o' clay which is temporal. *She* has quickened the spirit in him which is eternal!"

Jason recoiled a step, puzzled and taken aback, while his friends interchanged uneasy glances.

Just as Brother Simeon finished speaking, there was a stirring in the crowd and a young man elbowed his way through to where the Shaker was standing. It was John Kent who had leapt from the chaise he was traveling home in and had entered the crowd in

time to hear what had been said. His face was flushed with excitement.

"Hold on, Brother Simeon Taylor!" he cried in a commanding voice, and he looked at the grotesque form stretched unconscious upon the ground in the ignominy of the coat of tar, and at Sarah Stone crouching beside it. "I want to understand this thing! Do you mean to say that sorrow for his deed has entered the heart o' Zeke Stone? Can you swear to that fact? Did he give himself up a-purpose?"

The crowd became absolutely still so as not to miss a word of what was being said.

"Yea, John," replied the good man solemnly; "the light was filtering into his darkened soul and he was like one distraught. He's paid the price required of him of his own accord. 'T was a fine symbolic act!"

John turned and looked at Jason. The latter, dazed and mystified by what he heard, turned slowly and recrossed the Bolton line. His friends followed after him not knowing what to think. The revenge they had been exulting in had somehow lost its savor.

As if by magic the crowd dispersed — a few of them going first to look with curiosity upon the face of the immovable figure lying on the ground. The sinister twist which they had always seen there and which had so blurred and marred its natural beauty had gone leaving the features in serene repose as though chiseled in marble. Then they in their turn beat a retreat, disappearing up the road.

Brother Simeon looked at Sarah Stone who was anxiously trying to feel for the beating pulse of her prostrate son.

"He'll be safe and cared for at our Shaker Village over at Harvard. 'T is but a few miles to go," he said gently. "We left our wagon on the Bolton road, and if thee'll carry him that far in thy vehicle, John, thee'll be doing a Christian act."

They started to lift the almost emaciated body of Zeke Stone, and Brother Simeon stooped and looked long at the face with evident wonder.

Suddenly the eyelids quivered and the eyes opened and looked up with a wistful question in them.

"Ezekiel?" murmured the lips faintly.

"Yea — *Ezekiel* — *Brother Ezekiel* from now on," replied the Shaker with emotion.

A smile illumined the white face for a fleeting moment, then the eyes closed again into unconsciousness.

They stood around him deeply affected.

"Brother Benny," said Brother Simeon softly, "'t was thee that quoted from the Holy Scriptures, 'And the crooked shall be made straight!' 'T was thee that had the vision — thy prophecy is fulfilled"!

Then they stooped and lifted him as gently as they could and carried him to John Kent's chaise that was waiting in the road.

And all the while John Kent was saying in his heart, "I understand it all now — Myrtle — poor girl!"

CHAPTER XII

ATTAINMENT

I remember that sweet garden,
With the lilies fair and tall,
But the maid who walked within it
I remember best of all.

TWICE the blooming season of the lilies and the larkspur and the pansies and the border o' forget-me-nots, and all the gaysome flowers have come and gone, and Nature has each time wrapped John Kent's garden in a white shroud of snow until the stirring of the sap when they would spring into life again, and when the sun entered the summer solstice they would turn their faces upward with the same exultation to receive the warmth of its rays. Twice John's peach orchards have "rejoiced" and borne fruit in the fruiting season and the bees have hummed ecstatically as they have drunk the honey from the fragrant pink blossoms and gone home happy and heavy with sweetness at sundown.

And now once again June has returned and has cast its magic spell over the land, and once more youth and joy have awakened in Myrtle's heart, and she can look out upon the sunshine and the blue sky and the flowers and up into John Kent's eyes with thanksgiving, for at last she is to be his bride and the wedding day is close at hand.

The news made a tremendous stir in the country-

side. John Kent — only son of Peter and Prudence Kent — owner of the peach orchards on Bolton Hill to marry the daughter of old fiddler Stone living in the dilapidated house under the sycamores and maples near by! Nothing of that nature had caused such talk since the memorable day when it became known that Eunice Gates had promised her hand to the brother!

It had taken Myrtle a long time to bring herself to take this step in spite of her longing to be John's wife. After the terrible day, the memory of which was like the scorching of a searing iron on her heart, she and her mother had hidden themselves behind the walls of their home and rejected all advances on the part of the village folk to hold converse with them. Sarah's attempt to protect her son by announcing his death to the Town Clerk was looked upon in two ways. Some said, "Poor woman — 't was love for her son made her do it! She was scared for him. 'T warn't right, to be sure, but then" — While others, especially those who stood high in the Meeting-House like Aunt Johanna and Uncle Jeremiah Priest, took firm ground and reiterated frequently: "'T is plain enough where Zeke Stone's old evil tendencies came from! No one ever could fathom Sarah Stone; for all that, no one sensed before she was a liar!" And they prepared to turn the cold shoulder.

But Sarah never gave them the chance they were waiting for. On the evening of her day of agony,

when she had seen her son borne off by the Shakers, an object horrible to look upon except for the white face with its clear, immovable features that haunted her, she closed the door between herself and the outside world.

Then had come the days filled with benumbing anxiety when Zeke lay seriously ill, blood-poisoning having set into a cut he received on his leg, necessitating amputation, and the slow recovery of mind and body from the terrible strain.

During that suffering period it was John Kent who brought them news of him, and John's presence was like a ray of sunshine in the house when he crossed the threshold to tell them what he had seen and heard.

"He's changed so you would n't believe it was he," he said one day; "he smiles when he's spoken to and, though he don't say much, all that ugly, defiant manner's gone from him, and his face is quiet and serene and kind o' dreamy-like. Brother Simeon claims he's been born again; he says there's nothing o' the old Zeke left in him, and they never call him by that name any more — 't is Brother Ezekiel and nothing else. Benny says he'll sometimes talk about when he broke his chains and got free same as though he'd felt the Devil binding him. 'T would do you good to see that boy with him! He sits beside him with those big eyes a-looking at him and those ears standing out like sounding-boards spouting Scripture to him, and Zeke

draws it in like a thirsty plant. I heard him say, 'Brother Ezekiel, thee knows there's joy in Heaven over one sinner that repenteth, and Eunice is there — she's surely full o' joy!' I was standing in the hallway and I put my head in the door to see how this would be taken, and I saw a kind o' light pass over Zeke's face same as though something was shining on it."

Another day, later on, they were all three sitting waiting for John's visit, as it was understood he was going over to the Shaker Village that morning. Sarah Stone was watching the window with her eager, restless eyes, though her body sat with rigid tensity in the rocking-chair, while fiddler Stone with Myrtle beside him sat on the haircloth sofa, and his hands as usual caressed his beloved fiddle-strings. Presently he spoke:

"Rosella Sprague stopped me in the road to-day and spoke of our boy, Sarah. Rosella's a kindly woman, say what you will — even if she was one o' the delegation sent to nose round our premises. She spoke real friendly, so I said to her, 'Rosella,' I said, 'how is it with Jason Gates these days?'"

Sarah turned fiercely upon him. "Abel!" she cried, turning around in her chair; "you did n't ask her that? You did n't stoop to speak his name?"

"Aye, I spoke his name," answered the fiddler quietly. "I want to see things straight and watch the marvelous working-out o' things. Jason had his sufferings as well as any of us — I don't forget that fact.

He'd been sorrowful for a long time — and sorrow warps the mind."

"What did she say, father?" asked Myrtle tremulously.

"Rosella said to me, 'Abel,' she said, 'Jason 's no better 'n he was before, only it's different — he's grown despondent; he don't know what to make o' things; he don't feel satisfied with his revenge; he feels as though some of it had escaped him somehow; even his mother, Anna Gates, can't talk him round!'

"'Well, Rosella,' said I, angry at what she said, 'what more does he want? Did n't he most kill Zeke? Don't he know he's got to go the rest o' his life on one leg from the brutal way he was dealt with? Ain't that enough for one man and a crowd o' followers to do to another who goes and gives himself up o' his own free will so's to pay the price asked o' him for his wrongdoings and so save his soul?'

"Rosella looked kind o' queer when I put it that way, and she put her finger to her lips. 'That's just it, Abel,' she said, lowering her voice — 'that's just it. Jason can't fathom what come over Zeke to do a thing like that, and what's more to think o' his soul! And he's come to think maybe 't was the work o' that Shaker and the strange-looking boy he takes round with him. He says Zeke never opened his lips, no matter what he did to him, and 't warn't natural, and all the time those Shakers were a-calling out to him and exhorting him, and when it was all over somehow

he felt as though he had n't got at what he was trying to get at. He 's heard his mother time and again tell how the Shaker touched the fence rail and spoke words over it, and he thinks now a spell was cast on it and things were fixed so he could n't have the revenge he wanted. He keeps a-harping on it till his folks are most distracted! So are his men friends who stood back o' him!' "

While they were talking, John came in the door.

"All 's going well," he announced cheerfully, "and Brother Simeon talked with me considerable. He 's a fine man for all folks are scared o' the sect. 'T is because they don't understand 'em. He says Zeke 's going to join the Shakers for good and all. It seems he said to him only this morning, 'I want to be where I can always go talk to Eunice in the burying-ground and listen to the music o' the wind harp, and I want to make it so I 'll never have to leave you and Benny Mackintosh as long as I live, for it 's here I want to be, and it 's here I feel I 'll keep my peace o' mind!' Brother Simeon kept a-wiping his spectacles when he told me this. He 's got a tender heart beating under that gray coat o' his."

But even with the assurance that her brother's future was secure in the seclusion of a life among the Shakers, Myrtle could not rid herself of the shame and horror of the terrible experience they had gone through, and when John repeatedly implored her to marry him, she would say, "Not yet — I could n't

face your folks yet, John!" And when he appealed to Abel Stone to plead his cause, the latter had answered: "Nay, John, Myrtle's right. Wait a while longer till folks get through talking. 'T will be better for you both — and your folks 'll feel easier. You're both young — 't won't hurt to wait a while."

So they had waited.

But now almost two years have passed, and June, with its garlands of flowers and its songbirds, its golden days of sunshine and its soft mellow nights, has come, and John and Myrtle are about to become man and wife and to start their new life in the ell of the Kent homestead up on the hill.

"Just think, mother," Myrtle kept saying, clasping her hands together in wonder, "think o' living in the sunshine up there and seeing the peach orchards from my window, and being able to look across the intervale to the distant mountains; and best of all to be able to talk it all over with John! And to sit in the garden with him under the apple tree as long as we want!"

On account of Sarah Stone's reluctance to come face to face with any of the village folk, they were to be married quietly in the sitting-room of the old house under the sycamores and maples, and Peter and Prudence Kent were to wait to bestow their blessing on them in their own home to which the young couple would go immediately after the ceremony. Myrtle had just been putting the finishing touches to the sim-

ple white gown she was to be married in, and in the cool of late afternoon she laid it carefully away and going out of the house she ran joyously through the woodlot toward the garden. She knew that John would be waiting for her and her heart gave a leap in her breast when she saw the tall, stalwart figure standing at the entrance.

The "goodly cedar trees" which Brother Simeon had assisted in planting had now grown into a thick hedge which formed a dark-green background against which the flowers gleamed in radiant colors. There was a narrow gap in the hedge through which Myrtle could slip as she emerged from the wood, but this day John called to her to come round to the entrance where two tall cedars trimmed into conical shapes formed a sort of gateway.

"The time has come to enter the garden same as we planned," he said, looking at her with love glowing in his eyes; "we'll go in hand in hand, Myrtle, and sit on the seat under the apple tree same as we said we would."

Quite solemnly she put her hand in his and they went in together.

It was the hour when the slanting rays of the sun illumine the flowers with golden light and when the shadows lengthen and the air is soft and filled with perfume. As they passed the flower beds they knew so well, Myrtle exclaimed at them as though she saw them for the first time.

"See, John!" she cried, pointing to them, "there are the lilies and the larkspur that stand for purity and wisdom! And the purple pansies that are a sign o' thoughts! And Brother Simeon's circle o' marigolds, the color o' the sun, that 'll give us health and remind us of Eternity! And here are the white poppies meant for sleep, and the modest mignonette — and, oh, John, look at the stately iris, straight like temple pillars, and the border o' forget-me-nots!" They were like children they were so happy!

"And what does this stand for?" asked John, his face all alight with smiles as they reached the apple tree.

"'T is the Tree o' Life," answered Myrtle gravely as she sat down on the seat beneath it. "'T was Benny told me that, and he said 'the fowls o' the air do lodge therein' — and John it's true! It's full o' song sparrows this very moment!"

Oh, the joy and the peace of the garden! They pledged their love to each other over and over as they sat under the tree, while the little brook sang as it rippled over the stones, and the soft breeze stirred the flowers, and the frogs in the meadow started to tune their banjos and to make strange, rhythmic music like the beating of a heart.

Dusk was coming on and a young moon like Diana's bow was just visible above the sunset afterglow.

"'T is the first summer moon," said Myrtle dream-

ily, "and father he'll be fiddling for the dancers at the Green. I've a notion I'd like to stroll over that way, John, and hear him. 'T will be the last time I can while I'm still Myrtle Stone — two days more and 't will be Myrtle Kent — you'll be sitting with in the garden!"

They arose and wandered along the paths again and out into the meadow beyond, and up through the orchards, and then turned and went down toward the road.

A sound of voices singing broke the stillness, and they stopped and listened.

"'T is the Shakers passing by!" said John in a low tone; "they've been up yonder selling herbs and their wagon's waiting for 'em down farther along."

They saw three figures walking past in the road below — one of them had but one leg and was supported on crutches; but there was vigor in his movements and he sang lustily with the two that were walking one each side of him.

We will march to Mount Zion!
We will march to Mount Zion!
Come, Brethren and Sisters,
We 'll sing a joyful song.
Labor to be cheerful,
Satan wants us tearful,
We will march,
We will march,
Praising Zion all along.

"It's Brother Simeon and Brother Ezekiel and

Benny Mackintosh!" exclaimed Myrtle, clinging to John's arm and gazing after them with a tender look in her eyes and lips that quivered a little.

"Whoever'd ha' thought o' such a happy ending to all our troubles, John? I could see plain enough 't was Brother Ezekiel passing by — and I can hear it in his voice."

We will march,
We will march,
Praising Zion all along.

The song died away in the distance after they had turned the bend in the road.

The two lovers with arms interlocked wended their way toward Fiddler's Green. After they had reached a certain point, they could hear the murmur of voices floating like a wave of pleasure in the warm air of the summer twilight, and as they drew nearer they could make out a moving mass of shadowy figures twirling round and intertwining, bowing here and curtsying there, then circling round and round — now faster — then slower — then round and round again as they danced on Fiddler's Green.

"Father's so happy to-night! — dear old father!" laughed Myrtle softly as she watched the scene.

"He's fiddling as though his heart was singing," said John all smiles, "but I guess Myrtle, sweetheart, it's you and I that are the happiest folks in the world!"

"Aye, that's surely so!" she assented, glancing up

at him; "but listen, John — listen to father calling out the steps!"

Turn your partner about!
Shake your right foot out!
Turn your partner about!
All hands round!

. . . . . .

Days long past, cramped old fingers pressing the strings and scraping the bow. Quaint old tunes, happy laughter and merry voices and dancing feet! Dear Reader, if you should chance to pass by Fiddler's Green who knows but you too might catch an echo from long-since broken fiddle-strings!

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